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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

MEXICAN PAYOFF

By BRETT HALLIDAY

Esther, Holly, Elsie, Jean—all attractive women, all of them interested in Mike Shayne. Which of them is a much wanted murderer and which of the other three fall victim to her lethal conspiracy? These are just two of the many hair-trigger problems the redheaded detective must solve during a search for a missing murder witness at the lush and crime-haunted Mexican fat farm 2 to 46

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LEO MARGULIES

Founder

CYLVIA KLEINMAN

Publisher

SAM MERWIN, JR.

Editor

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Mexican Payoff

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The redhead must bring back a most-wanted woman from a Mexican fat farm dedicated to the hiding of crooks from the law. More than one of the resident mobsters has an old Shayne score to settle.

THE BLONDE WAS LONG and lithe and leggy, and her brown eyes were full of amused interest as she looked Mike Shayne over. Shayne returned the compliment. The first thing he noticed was that all he could see of her flawless skin was tanned a gorgeous honey-brown. The bikini she was wearing wouldn't have made a handkerchief for Raggedy Ann.

"Two great minds with but a single thought," she said, spreading her big beach towel on the rubberized tube chair and lowering her fliptop sunglasses so that Shayne couldn't

see her eyes. She stretched luxuriantly, and the big breath she took was a test under battle conditions for the yellow bikini. The suit passed the test—just barely.

"Let's hope so." Shayne peeled off his t-shirt to stand at poolside in maroon shorts. His glance around the pool revealed nothing in the blonde's class. He looked down at her, lifted an eyebrow in quizzical semi-approval.

"You know," she said, stretching long legs to tempt the noonday sun. "Something like—what in heaven's name

© 1977 by Brett Holliday

THE NEW

MIKE SHAYNE

SHORT NOVEL



are you of all people doing here?"

Shayne looked at her with renewed interest. "You know me?" he said. "I don't think I've seen you before."

"No, no," she said. "God, *look* at you! There isn't an ounce of lard on you anywhere. You'd drive Vic Tanny or Jack La Lanne to an early grave. What the devil are you doing in a fat farm?"

Shayne looked around again. The first six people his eye lit upon must have represented three hundred extra pounds. That was the first thing he noticed. The second was that, although the Rancho Del Mar spa was thirty miles inside Mexico on the road south of Ciudad Juarez, every one of the faces around the pool—always discounting the silent, white-clad servants—was recognizably Anglo.

Fat farm, he thought. Well, it was an apt enough term.

He looked at her—all five-six of her—and thought, *What the hell*.

"I'm a private detective," he said. "I'm looking for somebody."

She sat up with a Stage Two version of the same amused smile. "Ah!" she said. "Then that's why I don't seem to be the only person who thinks you stick out like a sore thumb."

"What does that mean?" Shayne said, sitting down in a basket chair.

"The man over there," she said, nodding slightly toward the shower-room door. "The one in white. He's not Mexican. And he's been giving you the eye ever since you came out by the pool. Is he the one you're looking for?"

Shayne ignored the question. "I'm Mike Shayne and I'm from Miami. You?"

She said. "I'm sure I've heard the name. I'm Esther Dumont. Soon"—she added with a wry smile—"to become Esther Hailey again. For the fifth time. And don't tell me you don't think I stick out here or I'll sock you, big as you are."

"Okay," he smiled. "You know damn well you'd stick out in a Las Vegas chorus line." His head moved toward the sunburned acres of flesh around the pool. "I thought something like that was more like the rule."

She said. "You don't understand the ethos of the fat farm. No woman, Mike Shayne, is ever skinny enough. What you see before you"—she gestured at her trim body—"is the result of three weeks of painful application at the exercise class, and three weeks of the most horrible meals in the—"

"*Please!*" Shayne said, hold-

ng up one hand. "I had lunch here. Carrot Surprise. Mushroom Delight. Soybean Supreme. Don't discuss it."

"All right. My decree just came through. I come down here to drop husbands. I've dropped three so far in Mexico alone. And after the sort of battle one goes through on the way to the decree, I'm always a mess. I check into the Del Mar to dry out and tone up and slim down."

"I'm thirty-three, Mike. I'm still full of beans. And when I go back across the border, hopping for another man"—her unseen eyes seemed to give him another hard thoughtful look—"I need to look my best."

"Good luck," Shayne said. "What do you know about this place? I'm curious."

"Oh, I know it's run by the Countess Esposito, and that her clientele is the most exclusive in the hemisphere, it makes the Golden Door look like a revolving door by comparison."

"The hell it does!"

"What do you mean?" the blonde said, sitting forward.

"There isn't any Countess Esposito. Esposito is the name they give foundlings in Naples. It means *married*. The lady you're talking about is a woman named Elsie Hoffer. She used to run a gambling casino in New York. She's the front

for a crook named Tony Donato, a Mafia type who ran another casino down the street from Meyer Lansky's in Havana. When they threw Batista out and sent Lansky packing with him.

"Most of those fat bums out of there have records as long as your arm, male and female, and they're here in Mexico nice and incognito because somebody's got a warrant out for them."

"My God," she said. "You're kidding!"

"The hell I am, lady," Shayne said. "And the character by the door? He's a Cuban bruiser Donato brought back from Cuba, and his name is Manny Cordero. Strictly small-time."

"Then who..."

Shayne said, "I'm starving. One more glass of Squash Squeeze and I'll chuck my cookies. Is there a place up north of here that features a good steak?"

The blonde took off her sunglasses and gave him a radiant smile. Her face was unlined and youthful under the upswept hairdo and there were tiny gold buttons in her earlobes.

"My car's parked out front," she said. "It's a silver-grey Imperial. I'll meet you there in fifteen minutes."

"You're on," Shayne smiled back at her.

The cantina was very north-of-the-border in appearance—dark, quiet, with soft mariachi music playing back somewhere in the potted palms. The steak was terrific and done exactly to the detective's taste—charcoal black outside, blood rare inside.

Esther Dumont, confident in her gringo Spanish after three trips, ordered for them. Shayne was particularly pleased to learn that Martell cognac was obtainable.

He called for a glass, with an icewater chaser, and Esther Dumont ordered a tropical drink, laced with powerful Barbados rum, that actually had a raw guayaba in it, whole. Shayne shuddered and tipped his cognac toward her in a wry salute. She drank up, her eyes on his.

"Now," Shayne said, "you were asking why I'm here. I'll tell you because I need some help."

"Help? From *me*?"

He nodded. "There was a big killing in Miami the other day. A really big one, where somebody rubbed out a witness to a major grand jury investigation into land-office fraud before he could talk. There was a witness to that killing. The witness was another party to the fraud, an out-of-towner who had recently showed up on the scene. The witness got away with a

suitcase containing a hundred and five thousand dollars."

"Wow!"

"That's not why I'm here. I don't give a damn about the money. It was embezzled from the company that was under investigation. What I want is the witness—a witness who can help the State of Florida and Dade County break up one of the biggest land swindles since the Twenties."

"One big enough," she said, her face sober, "to murder for?"

"You're damned right! The witness knows they won't stop at just one murder. And our missing person knows that a fugitive on the run has on a place of refuge set up for just that sort of thing."

"A place where you can get your whole face changed by plastic surgeons—even your fingerprints and your whole appearance—while you hide out in almost complete security. A place where a gringo warrant doesn't mean a thing. A place where, I might as well admit, our witness seems to have disappeared without a trace."

"My God," she said. "But Mike, *you're* here. Surely you can get in anywhere the witness can even if the place is run by crooks."

"That's why I need your help," the redhead said. "Our witness is a woman."

II

"A WOMAN?" Esther Dumont said, leaning forward.

"A woman who knows her life isn't worth two cents if anyone finds out who she is or where she is. Who knows her only chance is in getting her face changed so completely that she can assume a totally new identity. And, damn it, I've got a feeling she's already done that."

"Then she may have already got away. She may have had the work done and made it back over the border."

Shayne nodded, a sour look on his face. He tipped up the cognac glass again. "But I don't think so. I've already been inside the room where the book-keepers work and had a look at the register. Not that you can tell much about names."

"Nearly everybody here is under an alias. But there have been plenty of people checking in since she disappeared, and she could have been any one of them. Nobody—nobody under seventy, anyhow—has checked out since then."

"Oh!" Esther Dumont sat back and took another tentative sip. Her eyes were very large in the dim light. "Then you want me..."

"I want you to help me find her. Whoever she is."

"But you don't know what she looks like."

"I know she used to be a real cutie-pie," Shayne said, studying the big gold-flecked mirror behind Esther Dumont. "I know more or less what she looked like when the case broke. We have a detailed drawing by her hairdresser, and he doesn't have a bad fist for an amateur."

Shayne pulled a folded paper from a pocket and handed it over. Esther Dumont opened it and looked it over.

"Mind you," Shayne added, "she could—and probably will—look a lot different by now." He glanced at the mirror again, then looked into Esther Dumont's dark eyes.

"Wow!" she said. "That's a big order, Mike. Virtually every fashion model in the business looks more or less like her this season? With the sucked-in cheeks—and the high penciled brows—and the..."

"Shayne said, 'let's give it a try anyway—just for the sake of appearances.'"

She was quick to respond to his change of mood. "Of course, Mike, of course. But I—oh, never mind." Her tanned fingers rested on his for a moment, warm and conciliatory. "But—oh, look, we're on sabbatical, aren't we? Let's dance."

"Okay," said Shayne. When he stood up he was over a head

taller than she, and his broad chest and heavy shoulders bespoke his immense strength. She melted into his arms as they began to move to the music. . .

On the highway back, Shayne drove. Esther nestled close. "You know," she was saying, "I pegged you first as an outsider not because of the . . . the fighting trim, but because of the suntan. I think I could almost have placed you in Miami from the suntan."

"I don't have a suntan," Shayne said.

"Yes, you do. On your face and hands. It's only people from the Northeast, like me, who have deep suntans in Miami. The real Miamians avoid the sun. Particularly when they're redheaded like you."

"I guess that's true. But getting down to business, Esther—you *have* noticed, of course, that we've been shadowed."

"We've—what?"

"Tailed. Look back now, nice and casual. See the Mercury behind us? He's been there, not three car-lengths away, since we left the spa. All through the meal I could see somebody keeping an eye on us through a potted palm."

"You're *kidding*!"

"No way," Shayne said. "Watch. I slow down, he slows down. See?"

"My God, you're right." The blonde turned back to the front. When he shot a glance her way he saw stark fear on her lovely face. "Mike, who is it?"

"Manny Cordero. He changed when we did and followed us in. I'm not sure why. Perhaps we'll find out back at the spa."

"But Mike—he's a gunman, a killer."

Shayne said. "I busted him back in sixty-five and sent him to jail for three years. He's no problem. Strictly small-time."

Her hand went to his arm. "Mike—step on it—*please*!"

"Forget him," Shayne said. "The moon is out. It's a nice evening. Enjoy it."

He parked the car and dropped her off at her room. Somewhat to his surprise Donato's hired gunman kept his distance. On sudden impulse Mike Shayne went back to the desk and placed a long-distance call. It took a bit of help from the bi-lingual clerk, and when the international problems had been dealt with all they got was a busy signal. He asked the clerk to try again in one hour, and to page him when he connected.

Then, savoring the balmy freshness of the south-of-Juarez air, he strolled into the softly lit garden patio of the spa, walking between huge tropical plants bearing flowers as big as

his big Irish fist and softly scented as a costly perfume counter—only to run into a sucker punch, delivered suddenly from cover, that nearly tore his head off.

Shayne's instincts saved him. He slipped the punch, dived, rolled, and got up in a hurry with his big feet squarely under him. He fainted once with the left and dug his big right hand viciously into his attacker's ribs.

The blow drew a scream of pain. Shayne hooked the attacker with a left hand that landed cheek-high and dropped his assailant to his knees, then waded in, swinging.

Suddenly it seemed there were two of them. The second man apparently had a sap. The leaded club described a vicious arc and connected with Shayne's head. The redhead saw a bright flash of light and felt a hell of a wallop to the side of his bony face. That was all for a bit. . .

You don't come out of that sort of thing without a splitting headache. This time was no exception. Shayne wiped the blood out of his eyes—there had been a cut, and it had bled—and got his hands under his broad shoulders and pushed upward.

When he was sitting erect at last, there was a moment when he wished he weren't. But the



feeling passed. And he looked around, groggy as hell.

The last wallop had landed him on his face, in the middle of the twisting garden path that wound its way through the tropical shrubbery.

He wasn't alone there.

The woman lay on her back no more than a yard away. Her sightless eyes stared heavenward. Even from where he sat he could make out the bloody hole in the front of her tailored dress. Still a bit dizzy, he shook his head again and got up on hands and knees for another, closer, look. Her face was easily visible in the softly diffused but adequate light.

She was dead. He checked that out against her pulse, even though he knew beforehand what the result would be. The

bullet that had ended her life had been from a heavy-caliber weapon, and the hole in front would be nothing compared to the hole it made coming out of her back. You could see the bright splash of red soaking the back of her black dress. She hadn't been dead long.

Her face. . .

He had never seen her in the flesh before in his life. He was sure of that. But she was a dead ringer, at first glance, for the drawing in his pocket.

III

SHAYNE GLANCED AT HIS watch in the dim light. He had been out maybe fifteen minutes.

He bent over the dead woman and had another look. Scowling, he turned her head this way and that, looking for the precise three-quarter view that the hairdresser in Miami had seen when he sketched the missing woman.

As he swiveled her neck—she had been dead slightly less time than he'd been out—the long dangling earrings on her shapely ears jingled lightly. He let go and got up.

Someone was coming.

He looked to right and left, hearing the footsteps come closer. Whoever it was was back in the long corridor that connected the garden patio with

the front offices of the main building of the big resort.

To his left lay the pool, an enclosed area. Getting out of the pool space would mean climbing a wall—being, in the meantime, a nice black target silhouetted against a nice white wall in the light of the waxing moon.

To the right, a series of dark-colored doors, each numbered, dotted the white wall, each one framed to right and left by exotic plants. Shayne, sizing up the situation, scraped the nail of one thumb against the reddish stubble on his square chin. Then he moved.

Door Number Two was locked. He slipped silently around the palm and tried Door Number Three. It gave—and Mike Shayne slipped inside just as the footsteps outside left the corridor and echoed on the tiles of the patio floor.

The room was dark, but a sliver of light showed under a door at the far end. Shayne dropped to one knee and looked across the floor at the thin line of light, looking for obstructions he might trip over, crossing the floor of the dark room, betraying his presence thereby. The coast was clear. He rose and tiptoed across it.

Before opening the door he put his ear to it, listening for

sounds. So far so good. He tried the handle—it moved. Then, slowly and purposefully, he turned the knob.

When it opened and the bolt slid out, he cracked the door for a peek into the lit room. It seemed to be some sort of hospital room with white beds—but no, it was a physical therapy room, with a long row of massage tables. There didn't seem to be anybody there. Cautiously swinging the door just enough to admit his broad shoulders, he slipped silently inside.

Suddenly he knew he had blundered.

The room—it seemed to be the women's equivalent of the one in which he had taken a relaxing and highly professional massage only that morning—was a bit longer than the one he had seen before.

At its far end, on one of the white tables, lay a young woman, wearing nothing but a towel draped over her trim behind. She lay on her stomach watching him, her bare bosom hidden from his view only by the shapely arms she was resting on.

She was quite beautiful. Her hair, like that of the dead woman, was dark and glossy. Her eyes were bright with intelligence, and were regarding him with amused detachment.

That was the first impression Shayne got of her.

His second was that she was not embarrassed at all at having him turn up this way.

The third was that—again like the dead woman—she was almost the spitting image of the missing witness, down to the Myrna Loy cupid's-bow mouth and sunken cheeks. As Esther Dumont had said, it was the look they all had that season—all the slender and lovely young things who turned up at the Rancho Del Mar.

"Well," the girl said. "Hello!" The pretty lips curved in an amused smile. "You're a little off limits, aren't you? Although—well, I won't tell if you won't."

Mike Shayne sighed. It would be so convenient, now and then, to be the sort of person who dissembled easily. He could reserve a statement with ease. Falsifying one outright look a little more doing. "I was looking for the hall."

"It's that way," said the girl. She got her elbows together under her—now they barely covered her. She kicked her pretty legs up behind her, showing him trim ankles. "However, I'm wondering how much of a hurry you're in."

"Not much," he said with a sheepish grin. "My name's Mike Shayne. And you?" He

looked her up and down. With the lively motion of her legs, the towel was covering less and less.

"Holly Parker," the girl said. "I'm here getting slimmed down and loosened up and deciding whether it's going to be more profitable to go back to my husband—he's in oil, up Fort Worth way—or to divorce him. I'm hoping I'll have something happen to me down here that will tip the scale one way or the other. I—"

A door opened suddenly opposite Shayne. Her body framed by it, one hand still in the other room at chest height, stood a woman. She was tall, statuesque, fashionably gaunt, with touches of grey at her well-coifed temples that were too perfectly placed to be accidents of heredity. She wore a perfectly tailored pants suit that must have cost upwards of twelve hundred dollars.

"Holly," she said, "I... What is this man doing here?"

"Countess," the girl said, covering her breasts with both hands. "He wandered in by mistake. This is Mr. Shayne. He—"

"Oh, don't bother," Mike Shayne said, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "We know each other from way back. Hi, Elsie. Remember me?"

"Why, Mike Shayne, you old

son of a bitch." The woman's began, the cold mask cracking for a moment. Then she recovered. Shayne was impressed. She had come a long way from the Upper West Side.

"Don't be embarrassed, Elsie," he said. "We all started somewhere. Holly Parker, meet Elsie Hoffer, the gambling queen of New York a few years ago. And believe me, with the competition what it was, that was a lot more impressive a title than Countess." His grin was wicked.

"Mike," the Countess Esposito said. "It's good to see you again. How have you been?"

That was all she got a chance to say. That was all she needed to say. The hand in the other room must have had one finger on a button, because just then two of the white-clad bruisers broke into the room, brandishing drawn pistols.

"Hey," said Manny Cordero, the first of the two. "What's this guy—"

"Manuel," she said, her eyes on Mike Shayne, "I think you'll want to take Mr. Shayne to the boss. He's been looking for an opportunity like this for so long that it'd be a shame to keep it from him any longer than is absolutely necessary."

"Yeah," Cordero said. "Hey, you!" This to Shayne. The detective noticed a purple discol-

oration just under the hood's right eye. "Hands up," the Cuban said. "Just march through this door."

Shayne obeyed: "Okay, Manny," he said. "What happened to your face?"

This drew him a hard dig in the ribs via pistol barrel as he passed the dark-haired gunman. "Well," Shayne added, "nice seeing you again, Elsie. And you, Holly. Enjoy yourselves."

He saw the Countess's aristocratically drawn face blanch with anger before Cordero marched him out the door.

What was running through Shayne's mind as he moved into the hall was the single nagging question—why hadn't anyone mentioned the dead woman so far?

IV

HE GOT A QUICK PEEP at a possible answer as Cordero and his fellow thug nudged him into the corridor that gave onto the patio. Whipping his head around, Shayne scanned the area where he had been attacked. There was no sign of a body there.

"Here," Cordero said, jamming the gun in his ribs to halt him before a big door directly behind the front office of the resort. They passed through a

second door—flanked to one side by a big secretarial desk. Then he was shooed into a big, well-appointed office, well lit and expensively furnished.

At the desk facing the door a burly man sat. He wore an expensive suit, with a satin shirt and well-cut four-in-hand in the middle of which was a diamond stickpin. Diamond studs glittered at his cuffs. His face, round, brutal, boorish, was that of a shark. Its expression grew all the colder as his ice-ball eyes recognized Mike Shayne.

"Well, well, well!" The burly man spoke in a hoarse voice. Shayne recognized the throaty croak. Tony Donato had, early in his tawdry career, fallen afoul of a rival mobster and had taken a knife in the gullet. He had recovered, but his voice had never come back.

Now he looked at Shayne with an expression of triumph. "Well," he said again. "This is a nice surprise, isn't it, Manny? Hey, check your pay envelope next week. There'll be a little something extra in it for you."

Shayne looked at Donato, said, "I suppose I can put my hands down first? After all, you've got me nailed."

Not waiting for an answer, Shayne folded his arms, looking down at Donato's five-foot-nine frame. The mobster must have paid six bills for the suit, he

was thinking, and he still looked like a bum.

"It's okay," the owner of the Rancho Del Mar said, waving a hand at Cordero. "He's covered." He turned to Shayne. "Well," he said, "I've been waiting for this for years. I owe you for six years in Federal prison and a hundred gees in lost revenue on business investments."

"Surely it was more than that," Shayne said. "Come on, Donato, I'm not the IRS. You made more than that in an average month with that numbers scam."

"You bastard!" The mobster gave way to anger. "You lousy...!" Then he got control of himself. "It doesn't matter now. But don't kid yourself there's any way out. You've cut your own throat."

"You're off American soil, Shayne. This is Mexico—and it's a part of Mexico where I have the cops in my pocket. You'll never get out of this room alive if I don't want you to. I can cut your throat right here and now and drop you in an alley up in Juarez and nobody'll know the difference."

Yeah, Shayne was thinking. Or frame me for a murder and then shoot me. Once again it occurred to him to wonder why the murder hadn't been mentioned.

"Go right ahead," Shayne said.

"The main thing," said Donato, "Is figuring out the best way to pay you off. I've gone through a hundred ways in my head, sitting in that cell. After I got out and come down here and started building my business back up again, I even considered having you eliminated right there in Miami. But..."

"But you wanted to watch it yourself," Shayne said, "and you can't cross the border, can you, Tony? Not after the crime commission up in Texas put out a Federal warrant for your arrest."

"Shut up," Cordero said.

"Stay out of this, Manny. So you went back to your first love, didn't you? Dope smuggling—smuggling it in through Tampa and Miami and..."

"How in hell did you know about that?" Donato stepped back and got himself under control again. "But it doesn't matter. Mario," he said to the hood who stood behind Shayne, at Cordero's left. "Hand me that gun."

The hood dropped a big Colt automatic in his boss's palm. Shayne watched Donato's eyes. They were like dry ice as the mobster cocked the pistol.

The phone rang.

Donato transferred the gun to

his left hand and punched a button on his desk, opening an intercom line that operated not through the desk set but through a wall mike. "Yeah?" he said.

"Somebody named Shayne's calling Miami, Mr. Donato." It was the voice of the front-desk man. "I've got his call ready now and I'm about to page him. I thought you might want to listen in."

"Forget it," Donato said.

"Better let me answer it, Tony," Shayne said in a loud clear voice. "I'll take it in here. Mr. Donato can listen in while I talk."

Donato, frowning heavily, waved okay with the gun, watching him.

"Michael?" said the familiar voice of Lucy Hamilton, Shayne's secretary. Shayne, hearing her soft Southern accent, smiled. "Are you all right?"

"Sure, angel," Shayne said. He winked at Donato, watching this take effect. The mobster's mouth tightened, but he made no move either for the button or to change hands on the big automatic. "You're right on schedule. I've got Donato right here by the phone. Is Tim there?"

"Yes."

"Could you put him on, please, angel? I think he's got

something to say Tony may find interesting."

There was a click, then, "Hi, Mike. "Hi, Donato, you crumbum."

"Who's *that*?" Donato said. He put the gun down and stared at Shayne.

"Tim Rourke, *Miami Daily News*. I covered your trial, remember? I did that nice interview where you—"

"What do you want from me, Rourke?"

"Not much—just Mike's voice, sounding happy and healthy, every twenty-four hours on the international telephone. If there are any interruptions at all in that schedule I go to a safe deposit box and turn a key, and everything in that box is mine and I get to keep it and do any damn thing I want with it."

"Such as what?"

"I haven't seen it yet," Rourke said. "But I'm looking forward to seeing it—and printing every syllable. Mike was the last guy to see Eddie Cutler alive."

"Cutler? But—"

"But you thought your boys silenced him. That's what *they* told you. I'd hire new hoods if I were you. He lived another hour, and Mike got to him, and Cutler was peeved at you for double-crossing him."

"But—"

Shayne broke in. "He was your main Florida contact man for smuggling narcotics. He had a hunch you'd cross him up someday and he kept records of all your dealings with him—names, places, the whole *schmier*, Tony. I've got it all on microfilm."

"And your only chance of keeping it quiet is to keep Mike nice and alive until he's done his business there. Otherwise," Rourke said, "I get a fat news-beat. Actually, Mike, I hope he breaks your arm or something. I'd love to take a look at those films."

"Thanks, pal," Shayne said. "Now, Donato? Still going to kill me? Because if you do, you've had it. You blew a major operation that had mob backing up north. When you got out you called in a few favors and got them to stake you again in Mexico."

"But if you can't make it here, that's the end of the line—isn't it? And if you drop this fly ball, they'll be sending somebody down to give you the Ben Siegel treatment—won't they?"

"Christ!" Donato said. His face was washed on both sides by trails of cold sweat. "Shayne, what the hell are you doin' here, anyhow?"

"Nothing to do with you," Rourke broke in now, "if you

behave. There's a witness—a woman named Peggy Watkins—missing in a big case down here. She's wanted for testimony against a bunch of big-time real-estate swindlers. We had a tip she was heading for your spa to get her face changed, maybe her prints. Mike, show him the drawing."

Shayne handed over the paper and Donato looked it over.

"Her hairdresser did this drawing," the redhead said. "This is what she looked like a month ago. I'm hoping your—doctors—can tell me who came into this fat farm looking like this."

He pulled at his left earlobe as he continued. "You'll notice her eyebrows were shaved, her lipstick had a real 'shaping' job done on it. Somebody had done her up a real 'look,' as they say. Her ears aren't pierced. She hasn't had a facelift. She—"

"Jeez!" the mobster said. "She looks like every broad in this dump under forty."

"That was one of the things that sent us here," Shayne said. "The 'look' she wore was a specialty of this place. What we want to know is what she looks like now. Because she's somewhere on these grounds, sandwiched in among a bunch of rich divorcées and fat riff-raff that sit out there by the pool

like a bunch of beached whales every day."

"You're sure?" Donato said. "I—what's in it for me?"

"Nothing, you bum," Rourke said.

Shayne broke in. "Tell you what, Tony—you help me out in this and stay off my back and you can have the films."

"No!" Rourke said. "Mike, you *can't*! With the whole case against Donato resting on that..."

"What do you say, Donato?" Shayne said. "Is it a deal or isn't it?"

The mobster looked up at him, his lips set, his eyes shifty. "I...okay. It's a deal."

Shayne nodded. "Well, that's it," he said. "Goodbye, Tim. Goodbye, Lucy. I'll call you tomorrow, angel."

"Goodbye," Michael," Lucy Hamilton sounded sad. He could hear a distinct note of disappointment in her soft voice. "Take care of—" Then the phone went dead.

Only then, looking down at Donato, did Shayne once again reflect that nobody had brought up the matter of the dead woman yet.

V

IT WAS A PECULIARITY of the Rancho Del Mar that, while a certain social stratification re-



mained in force most of the day, all barriers went down at meal-times. Everyone stood in line, carrying his or her own tray—everyone had to step on the scale to have current weight recorded before picking up his utensils—everyone was served the same depressing food.

Mike Shayne, standing in the breakfast line, had been re-hashing the schedule of the previous night's events. The more times he ran them through the wringer, the less sense they made.

Somebody had tried to set him up—and then had changed his mind. Who? It was probable that Cordero had had a hand in it. Shayne felt sure it was Cordero he had hit on the patio, Cordero's partner who had sapped him in return.

It was quite probable that Cordero had a partner—a partner who pulled the strings that made Manny jump. Tim Rourke had once said of Cordero, "If his IQ were two points lower he'd lose motor control," and Shayne's own opinion of the gunman was scarcely higher.

Who was the partner? And did the killing have to do with his own errand at the Rancho Del Mar? Then, why had the body disappeared? And why had nobody mentioned it as yet?

On the way back to his room Shayne had checked the patio. Not only had the body been removed—somebody had evidently scrubbed the tiled path free of bloodstains while the redhead sparred with Donato in the big office up front. Now there was no visible evidence to support what the detective had seen the night before, a fact which in no way abated Shayne's conviction he had in fact seen it, touched it. . .

At the steam table, he held out his plate dutifully, not looking down at the ghastly vegetar-

ian mess the attendants ladled out on the metal tray. In the two days Shayne had been at the resort, feeling his way around, he had already learned that the only direction the cuisine would ever go was down. At the end of the line, he headed for the coffee stand. A good cup of Colombian coffee was the ranch's only concession to taste.

On the way he all but bumped into a small dapper man in an incongruous-looking three-piece suit. Shayne excused himself—and then wished he hadn't.

"Shayne!" the little man said. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Mike Shayne's lip curled. Peter Aiello, a rackets mugg who—like so many other guests of the spa—owed him a disservice or two. Shayne had sent Peter Aiello's brother Angelo to the chair twenty years before on a kidnapping case in Pensacola, and the surviving brother had vowed blood revenge.

The redhead sighed his disgust. "Slumming," he said.

"Okay," the gangster said. "Wise off. You'll get yours. This is Mexico, Shayne. You're out of your territory. You could wind up dead."

Shayne shrugged. "Hot air, Aiello. Before you make any

plans, try talking to Donato. He may have a surprise for you."

Shayne moved unhurriedly to the coffee stand—just in time to run into Holly Parker, the girl from the massage room.

Holly was a bombshell in a form fitting pants suit of Navy blue and white shoes. Her expression was the same as the night before—amused and inviting. "Mike Shayne," she said with a smile. "I was afraid I might not be running into you again after last night. What happened?"

"Come on," Shayne nodded toward a long table. "Bring your tray. We'll sit over there."

"And commiserate with each other over the food? Okay. It helps take one's mind off the mock-egg and the soybean bacon."

Shayne said, "If you insist on talking about this stuff on our plates I may change my mind." He steered the two of them to the table.

Esther Dumont slid into the seat on his other side.

"Mike," she said. Her expression lost a bit of its warmth as she noticed the dark-haired girl joining them. "Oh—we've got company."

Shayne shoved the terrible breakfast away after one disgusted sniff and stirred his coffee. He said, "Esther Dumont, meet Holly Parker." His eyes

went from one to the other. He sighed as he noticed what dead ringers they were for each other—and for the murdered woman—even worse, for the woman on the drawing in his pocket.

"Hi, Esther," Holly said, but her eyes went back to Shayne. "Mike, you *have* to tell me what happened last night."

"Yes, Mike," Esther put in. Her hands were on the table and she made no move toward either food or drink. "Do tell us what happened."

The redhead sighed. "I got waylaid right after I dropped you off," he told Esther. "Somebody—probably Cordero—socked me and I hit him back. It set me up for a second character with a sap. When I woke up..." He hesitated a moment, then added, "When I woke up I was lying next to a woman in black who had been shot in the chest. She was dead. I heard people coming and split. On the way out I ran into Holly."

"My God!" Holly said, her hand to her mouth. "Black dress? Mike—did she wear dangly earrings?"

"You know her?" Shayne said.

"It sounds like Joan Renault. She's Dr. Murdock's nurse. She doubles as therapist. I was waiting for her last night when

you ran into me. She was supposed to give me a massage. She never showed up."

Esther Dumont said, "She usually sits at the table by the window at breakfast. There—in the empty seat next to Dr. Murdock."

"That's Dr. Murdock?" Shayne said. "It looks more like Hymie the Quack. I'll be damned. Hymie was kicked out of the medical profession in Florida ten years ago for running an abortion mill. Rumor has it he took up plastic surgery, mainly on people's fingertips."

"Oh!" Holly Parker said. "But after the Countess found Mike in the room with me, she called a couple of the attendants. They came in carrying guns and herded him out. It was like an old Bogart movie." She smiled at Esther. "It was exciting."

"I'll bet it was," Esther Dumont said. "Mike, was it Donato?"

"He threw some threats around," Shayne admitted, between sips of coffee. "But I coppered my bets before coming down here, and filed away some damning information about him that will go to the Press if he tries anything. It ended with a Mexican standoff. That's the kind of deal where you and I each have a pistol at each

other's head, and neither of us dares try anything."

"Then you're safe," Esther Dumont said, her eyes on the detective, her expression pensive.

"Am I?" Shayne lifted one receding eyebrow. "There are at least twenty people in the room right now who would be glad to see me dead—and at least ten who are dumb enough to try it. I ran into one of them at the coffee stand just now. He won't do anything, of course. Donato knows what he knows now would come down hard on the first one to lay a hand on me."

"Then if Donato has reason for protecting you—I still don't understand."

"That still leaves eight or nine who have the same idea. And they haven't talked to Donato yet. Who knows? They could find out about the amnesty an hour or two too late?"

"Oh!" Esther Dumont said. Her eyes were sober and her pretty mouth set. "Mike, there's a party here tonight. There'll be mariachis, dancing, a bazaar—a whole Mexican fiesta."

"I get you," Shayne said. "Lots of dark corners around the grounds. Lots of opportunity to stick a knife in me and drag me off into the bushes? So I ought to lay low until it's over?"

"Yes, I. . ." She let it tail off.
"Forget it," Shayne said.
"Would I skip a chance to go to a party with a couple of chicks like you two?"

VI

THAT BROKE THE ICE.
Breakfast—all but the food—went better after that. Shayne, his sharp eyes darting from girl to girl, took note of the fact that, of all the women here who resembled Peggy missing witness Polly Watkins, Holly Parker was the only visible woman whose ears had not been pierced.

After breakfast, the two girls went off to exercise class, leaving Shayne with some time on his hands. He went to the coffee stand for a third cup of the black brew, sat down and wondered about a number of things.

One of them was why, if the spa could offer a cup of coffee this good, it bothered to shovel up such textureless, emetic goop and call it food.

The other questions were more important without being any less vexing. Shayne pulled at his left earlobe, finished his coffee and went out to the hall. As he did he passed an arched door which gave onto the patio where he'd been slugged the night before. There Joan Renault—was it she, after

all?—had poured out her bright blood.

His frown became a scowl, and he was brusquer than usual when he asked the desk clerk to call him a cab.

Once on the road to Juarez, he looked back through the cab window. Sure enough, there was a black car tailing him. He got out near the border, paid the cabbie in dollars and walked across the bridge to El Paso. The moment his feet touched United States soil, the air of menace seemed to dissipate. Shayne lost the feeling of being tailed. Walking unhurriedly down the main street, he chose a hotel at random, walked in and asked the cashier for a dollar's worth of change. Then, taking up his station before the pay phones in the lobby, he got to work, charging several calls to his office number in Miami.

One call was to the El Paso police. One was to Tim Rourke at the *Miami Daily News*. Another was to Will Gentry, Miami chief of police.

The last was to Tony Donato at the Rancho Del Mar, across the border in Juarez. It took him a few minutes to get through, but eventually the mobster's raspy voice grated, "Yeah, Shayne? What do you want?"

"There was a murder in the

Rancho Del Mar last night, Tony."

"Murder? What do you mean? Nobody's been—"

"Hold it. I'm calling you because I don't think you know anything about it. And I'm getting in touch with you *before* I call the Juarez cops. I'm giving you a chance to do a little digging on your own before the Federales show up, so you can cover your tracks and get everything nice and tidy. You know how the Mexican cops are, even when you think you've got them fixed."

"Okay, Shayne. What do you know about this? And who..."

"A woman. It may be Joan Renault, the girl who worked for Hymie the Quack. She's missing, anyhow, and she fits the description of the woman I found last night in the patio."

"Shayne, there wasn't any woman in the patio. I walked through there myself this morning."

"The killing occurred about thirty-five minutes before I came to your office, Tony. She was shot in the chest, once, with a heavy-caliber weapon. Maybe a Magnum. Maybe even an Army Colt like the one Cordeiro's shadow carries."

"Go on."

"You'll want to know everybody's whereabouts during that last hour before you and I

had our little chat. And Tony, when you find the body—if you find the body—I'll give you eight, five and even that the arrow will point to Manny."

"Shayne, are you on the level?"

"Better check it out, Tony. I'm calling the Mexican cops the minute I hang up. And Tony—one more thing."

"Yeah?"

"Those films back in Miami—Cutler kept information not only on you but on several people he thought might be the ones you would wind up sending down to kill him. One of them was Manny, the one who did it."

"Shayne, you're bluffing. You don't know anything about it."

"Maybe not," said Shayne, "but if I don't, you'll have to pay for a look at my cards. But that isn't the point, Tony. Cutler had evidence that Manny was skimming the bag he picked up from Cutler in Miami on the one hand and skimming the dope you sent him from Mexico on the other."

"Making money hand over fist, what with once-cut Sinaloa heroin going for the price it's getting these days. You didn't cut the cards, Tony. You had it coming. Manny's been stiffing you for years."

"Shayne, if I thought—"

"Don't take my word for it,

ask him. But make sure you're armed, and have an eye on him, when you ask it. He's running scared, seeing me here. He knows I know. That's why he slugged me and tried to frame me for the woman's killing last night. The trouble was, I woke up before he could arrange to have somebody discover me lying next to the body."

That was enough, Shayne thought, for the moment. He'd save for later what he had deduced about the accomplice removing the body and the other evidence.

"Shayne, if you're lying. . . ."

"If I am, you're in no trouble—unless that body turns up on Rancho Del Mar property when the Federales come by to pay you a visit. Don't think you can fix this one, Tony. There's a missing-persons alert out for the Renault girl in El Paso—I just checked.

"The minute the U.S. gets into the scene, your bought-and-paid-for local cops get overriden by Mexico City, and the big boys get into the picture. When that happens, you'd better have your own nose clean. And Tony—I'd make sure I had myself a nice fall guy ready to take the rap."

"Shayne. . ." the mobster began. But Mike Shayne had hung up. He called Information



for the number of the Juarez police.

VII

SHAYNE HAD THE BULK of his day's legwork nicely polished off by noon and, in a weak moment, thought of going back to the Rancho Del Mar for lunch. Then he remembered what lunch was like at the spa and strolled back across the international bridge into Mexico,

thinking a hungry man's thoughts of good red beef.

His mind made up, he walked unhurriedly down Juarez's main drag and let his nose lead him where it might. The first *cantina* that smelled of roast beef—*carne asada*, the menu called it—drew him in, like an iron filing in a magnetic field.

He wasn't disappointed. The meat was marinated in a funky sauce that gave it a delicious aftertaste without in any way detracting from its own meaty taste. He was feeling mellow when he left.

The cabdriver wanted to try out his English, which wasn't bad, and his knowledge of baseball, gringo-style, and their leisurely ride south toward the spa was a pleasant one in keeping with Shayne's mood. So much so that it came as a distinct surprise when the driver pulled over by the side of the road.

Shayne sat up, curious. "What's up?" he said.

"*Senor*," the driver said, "you said Rancho Del Mar?"

"Right." Shayne nodded. "So what...?"

Then he saw the road was awash with police cars; and they all seemed to be converging on the turnoff for the Rancho Del Mar. As he watched, two more cars turned in, both of them driven by men in the

uniform of the Mexican police.

The driver whistled and made a sign of distress, holding up one hand and shaking it as if it were a limp dishrag. "*Ay Chihuahua*," he said. "You mind if I let you off here, *Senor*? My license..."

"I understand." Shayne got out and paid the driver. He watched the car turn around and hightail it back toward the border, then, shrugging, began huffing it up the curving drive that led to the spa.

As he drew closer he could see that it wasn't just cop cars. There was an ambulance, and the small crowd of spa patrons and white-coated attendants gathered just outside of the front-desk area seemed to be waiting for something.

Shayne spotted Holly Parker and ambled over to see her. "Holly," he said. "What's going on?"

"Hi, Mike," the dark-haired girl said. "It's Donato. He seems to have had some sort of shootout with Cordero and that funny-looking man he carries around with him—carried, I mean. Donato seems to have shot the man, I think, and then Cordero shot *him*."

"Manny shot Donato?" Shayne said. This was a wrinkle he hadn't anticipated. Donato, he thought, must be slipping to let a second-rater

like that take him. "How bad is it?"

"The flunky is dead. Donato took a bullet in the leg. He'll be off his feet for a while."

"And Cordero?"

"Gone. And Mike—they found the girl. It was Joan Renault, just as you said. Her body was buried in a shallow grave up behind the shrine at the top of the hill."

"Interesting," the redhead said. "I wonder how I can get through to see Tony."

He got the answer to his question before he finished it. A brown-clad figure materialized at his elbow and said: "*Perdoneme, Senor. You are Mike Eshayne?*"

Shayne grinned. Lucy had told him about the Latino habit of adding a syllable to certain words when not speaking Spanish. "That's right. "Can I help you?"

"Si." The policeman had one hand on the big pistol at his side. Shayne looked him over; he looked tough and competent. "You will come this way, *por favor.*"

Holly, her eyes wide, put a hand over her mouth. "Mike. . ." she began.

"It's okay, Holly," the detective said. "I think they're going to wind up questioning everybody. The Mexican police have a rep for being thorough."

He smiled at her and preceded the policeman down the aisle.

They stopped at the anteroom before Donato's office. Behind the secretary's desk sat a thick-set dark-skinned Mexican in plain clothes, a man with beetling brows and a black mustache which was lifted slightly on one side by a poorly healed knife scar on his upper lip. The face of a tough, inscrutable Indian—and of a man unmistakably in command of the situation. He looked at Shayne, then at his guard. "*Senor Eshayne,*" the guard said.

"*Bueno,*" the man with the scar said. "You may go now." The guard turned smartly on one heel and went out. "Well, now," the man behind the desk said. "You are"—he looked at a card on the table—"Michael Shayne. You are from Miami, and you are a private detective. Well, I am afraid you are not accredited here."

"I know," Shayne said. "I'm on a missing persons thing." He reached in one pocket of his coat—noting the hard glance the man behind the desk gave him—and pulled out a white envelope. "This may help explain." He remained standing in front of the desk while the man behind the desk read the contents of the envelope.

When his interrogator re-

turned the letter to Shayne, he jerked a thumb at the inner door. "Inside, please," he said. Shayne lifted a brow and walked to the inner room. As he did so, two white-clad ambulance attendants trundled Tony Donato past on a gurney.

Donato tried to rise. "Shayne!" he said. "You were right, Manny tried to kill me. I got his pal, but I missed Manny. He's out there somewhere. Look out, he says you're next."

They wheeled Donato out. The stocky Mexican gestured to Shayne to sit down and closed the door after them.

"Well," the Mexican said in serviceable English. "So you're here on a job for my friend Will Gentry. I believe Will has mentioned you to me."

"Hey!" Shayne said. "You're not Armando Segura?"

"A *sus ordenes*." The Mexican sat down behind Donato's big desk. "You have a good memory, as Will said you did."

"This is a pleasure." Shayne rose to shake hands. "Will says you're the best cop south of the border. I—damn it, now there's something else I don't understand." He sat down again, seeking the right words.

"Go on, please."

"Well... On the one hand, Donato says he has the local police in his pocket. On the

other, Will Gentry, who knows people, says you're the most incorruptible officer in Mexico."

"I see your problem. You wish to be polite. You do not wish to say there are crooked cops in Mexico. Well, we both know what we are talking about. There are towns where you pay the *mordida* and the police look the other way while you smuggle cocaine across the border."

"Somehow it doesn't sound so bad when you say it."

"It is not. We both know there are *Norteamericano* cities where the fix is on, no? This does not affect a man like Gentry, with the dedication. Okay. I am—this is as we say not for the public, you understand?—I am here on detail from the *Distrito Federal* to investigate just such things as these.

"*Senor* Donato has been riding high, as has the policemen he has bought. But the day of wrath, as we say, is coming. We have almost enough information to act upon right now, and we are only awaiting the right time to move. I am hoping this petty affair today has not spoiled things for us."

"I don't think it has," Shayne said.

"Nor I. It is then important to learn as much as possible of this little matter and settle it as quickly as possible, in such a

way that the policeman who is under a cloud, as you say, does not suspect we are onto his game.

"He is outside, running errands for me. He thinks I am in town visiting my nephew, who is a dentist in Ciudad Juarez, and that I am simply horning in in order to be nosy. Very well. That is what I wish him to think."

VIII

SHAYNE NODDED. "I begin to see what Will was talking about. He said you had your own ways of doing things, and you had a way of making them work."

Segura said, "I played baseball for two years in the Texas League. I am impatient. I quit and went back to school when I found I did not consider three hits out of ten times at bat a respectable percentage. As a policeman I want always to win. Sometimes I lose. I am still impatient. This time I hope to win." He added, "As always."

Shayne nodded. This was his kind of talk. "Might I ask what you learned about the dead girl?"

"Okay. I'll tell you what I know, then you tell me what you know. She was not a real nurse. She had failed nursing school and then taken a course in Swedish massage. Our

policeman here, with the itchy fingers, saw to it that she got a license to operate, as he had done with Dr. Murdock.

"Oh, yes, I see you wish to tell me about him, too. We have a dossier on him. When we move on Donato we move on Murdock, too. We would have a long time before this if we had had the smallest piece of evidence that he intended to continue with the abortions. So far he is clean on this charge, at least on this side of the border."

Shayne's nod was appreciative. "In order to throw a few red herrings out there in the path, I've put the word out that there was a missing-persons warrant out for her in El Paso."

"There is not?"

"There is now. I put one in myself a couple of hours ago. I wanted to make sure U.S. law meddled in this—to bring the big people like yourself down from Mexico City. I didn't want this thing buried." He raised one eyebrow apologetically. "I didn't know you were already on the job."

"Think nothing of it," the Mexican said. "You did well. As for betraying my position, the El Paso police and I are working hand in glove on this. When the big arrest comes, and the 'guests' of this place—yes, we know all about their records—go fleeing across the

border, the El Paso police will be tipped off in advance. They will be waiting, with local warrants ready to serve. Any action the El Paso police take on your missing persons claim will be taken through me."

"Good. But the girl? Did you get the bullet?"

"We are working on that now. It was very likely a .45. It is not inside her. It may be on the grounds. She was killed near enough to the patio, where Donato says you found her, for her still to be bleeding when they put her there. That does not leave us too big an area to search. The gun Cordero shot Donato with is, of course, a forty-five. I think it likely that when we get Cordero we will find the weapon which did the killing."

"Donato says Cordero intends to bump me off next. I think he thinks I know too much."

"Do you?" the Mexican said. "Let us see what you know..."

It was after three when Shayne and Segura parted company. Shayne strolled into the little patio where he had been attacked the night before and did some idle snooping before the Mexican patrolman in charge of that area shooed him off.

He walked away, humming a tuneless little tune, thinking. As he rounded a corner he

bumped headlong into the Countess Esposito and had to brace her to keep her from falling.

"Well, Elsie," he said. "Sorry about that." He looked her in the eye, and, to his surprise, saw stark fear there. "Hey," he said. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, Mike. My fault. I'm so clumsy today. I'm sorry about last night. I shouldn't have—but I knew if Tony found out I'd recognized you and didn't report to him immediately..."

"That's okay, Elsie," Shayne said affably. "I understand. Donato has a bad temper. And nothing happened to me anyhow."

"That's what I don't get, Mike. I thought afterwards that I might have sent you to your death. I had an attack of conscience so bad that I—"

"Elsie," Mike Shayne said, "this is Mike, who cleaned you and Tim Rourke out at poker years ago at your casino in Coral Gables, remember? Did you ever know me to walk into a sucker deal? Come on now."

"I should have known. But, Mike, that girl... Who do they have pegged for it? Do you know? I'm so nervous... the cops all talk Spanish to each other and I can't follow them, and I don't understand the way they do things. I."

"It's a different system, Elsie," Shayne said. "Our justice is based on British common law, theirs on the Code Napoleon. They don't have the presumption of innocence thing built into their procedures. They're trying to rattle you. And me. And everybody."

"Thanks, Mike. You're a lot of reassurance. I guess I'm getting soft. I can't take it any more. Maybe it's time to get out of the business. Sorry about last night." She moved down the hall, looking twenty years older than she had the night before.

Shayne discovered Esther Dumont at his elbow.

"Mike," she said, "what happened to the Countess? She looks like a washerwoman. And that's a Dior original she's wearing! I've never seen such an overnight change in anybody in my whole life! My God, Mike, she must be afraid she's the chief suspect! Of course! Who had a better motive?"

"Motive?" the detective said.

"Everybody knew it. The Countess—oh, I know you told me she was a phony, but I've got into the habit of calling her that—she was Donato's wife. She..."

"Wife?" Shayne said. "Well, I'll be damned!"

"Why, yes—and Joan Renault was having an affair with

Donato. He stayed in the background, you know. He let her run the place. We always figured the 'Countess' thing was from her previous husband. But one of my girl friends spilled the beans.

"The license here was registered in the names of Mr. and Mrs. Anthony Donato. I didn't know who he was, of course. I don't think anybody did."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Mike Shayne repeated. "And if Elsie found out that her husband intended to dump her for a girl much younger than herself—and with divorces still much easier to get in Mexico..." He shrugged.

"No wonder she looks worried," Dumont said. "I would be, too. But, Mike, that's not what's bothering *me* right now."

Shayne turned to face her. Her green eyes were large and inviting. He said, "What's bothering you, Esther?"

"It's the party—the fiesta. I was so looking forward to it, and now there won't be one. And..."

"Won't be one? Whatever made you think that?" Mike Shayne said. "Of course it's going on. And I, for one, intend to have a ball."

IX

ON THE WAY BACK to his room,

Shayne ran into Holly Parker again. She wore a brief thigh-length robe over a mint-green bikini so small that he took a second look at her to make sure it was there. She was hardly wearing any more than she had been when he met her on the massage table.

She took amused note of his inventory of her visible assets. "Hi, Mike," she said. "I'm going to go take a dip. Why don't you join me at the pool?"

Why not? He was hot and dusty from the long walk up from the main road, and there would be no action until seven, when the musicians arrived and the party began. He said, "I'll meet you there in ten minutes."

Her smile was warm and accommodating. "That's a deal."

Shayne watched her walk away in silent beach sandals. He sighed. Women—even those under suspicion of murder—always attracted him.

Speaking of women, he owed Lucy a call. Before undressing, he dialed the front desk and put in a call to Miami. Just as he was ready to leave, the phone rang.

"Shayne," he said.

"Your call is ready, sir."

"Okay."

"Michael Shayne's office, good afternoon," the voice said in that soft accent.

"Hi, angel, this is Mike."

"*Michael!* I didn't expect to hear from you until this evening. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, angel, I'm fine. I just wanted to know what you were doing tonight."

"Me? Why, nothing, Michael. I was going to read."

"Lucy, just as a favor—could you invite Tim over for dinner? And hang on to him until—say midnight?"

"Certainly, Michael—but why?"

"I have a funny feeling," Shayne said, "that this whole damn thing is going to bust wide open. I'd like to be able to shoot Tim the news the minute the smoke clears."

"*Michael!* You mean you've got the witness?"

"No, Lucy. But I do have a murder ready to break—and something else that's just as big. Remember, I promised Tim a beat on this one."

"Well—Tim's on a downer with you. There's that business of the microfilms."

"I know. I called him earlier today, and there was frost in the air. He got me what I wanted, but he didn't like it."

"Poor Tim. He wants this story so badly he can taste it." Her own voice went plaintive. "I know you gave Donato your word, but—"

"Sorry, angel. But I'm the

man with the cards, and I'm the one who has to play them."

"I understand, but—"

"Tell you what—there's a bottle of whiskey in the second drawer of my filing cabinet. Take it home with you and ladle it out as required. It's guaranteed to take away the pain, and it's a hell of a sight better than that nose paint he usually drinks."

"Okay. I have a couple of extra pork chops. I suppose Tim would like that."

"Yeah," Shayne said. "Think of the evening as your good deed for the week."

"All right, Michael. Take care."

"I will, angel. I'll call you later." He hung up. He was feeling good. Things were going well, even if they were far from wrapped up. There was a not totally unpleasant air of danger in the air.

He grabbed a towel and went out the door into the bright sunshine.

He spotted Holly at the far end of the pool, her tan legs in the water. Shayne waved, tossed robe and towel onto a tube chair, kicked off the rubber slides, and hit the water in a racing dive, making a substantial splash.

The water felt fine. Shayne ducked his red head under the surface and pulled with easy

strokes that made the big deltoid muscles of his shoulders bunch like fists.

Ten strokes from the edge of the pool he looked up, just in time to see Holly, standing at pool's edge, jostled by a passer-by on her way to the diving board. After teetering for a moment, Holly fell into the pool.

She floundered, then surfaced. Shayne's big hand was already at her elbow. "You okay?" he said.

With a disgusted look, she pulled off her bathing cap and threw it onto the tiles. "I guess so," she said. "But look at this mop, will you? Damn! If only some people would watch where they're going!"

Her angry gaze went this way and that. The woman who had bumped her into the water was standing by the big board, but Holly didn't seem able to spot her. Shayne watched with whetted interest as she pulled herself up and sat at pool's edge, her feet again dangling in the water.

"Oh," she said as he joined her. "I think you've guessed my deep dark secret."

"I have?" Shayne countered.

"Mike—look into these fascinating orbs of mine. Do you detect a strange enigmatic quality? An air of mystery? An exotic inscrutability?"

"I detect myopia," Shayne said. "But they *are* pretty eyes, no doubt about that."

"Mike, I have to wear body makeup around here from all the bruises I get bumping into chairs. I can't see four feet without my glasses. And I don't dare put on glasses while man-hunting." She smiled at him, added, "Or even while practicing for it."

Shayne smiled. "A newsman friend of mine once interviewed Hedy Lamarr and asked her where she got that sexy glare she was famous for. She shrugged and told him she just stared at the camera and tried to look as mean and stupid as she could." He chuckled. "Tim was crushed."

"See?" she said. "There go all our feminine secrets, blown by a careless word." She licked her lips and winked at him. "Come on, Mike—race you to the other side."

"You're on." Shayne kicked off from the edge into a powerful crawl. Unexpectedly, strong swimmer that he was, he found the girl in the green suit keeping pace with him. His curiosity aroused, he poured on the steam—and found her once again pulling even with him.

This was no ordinary swimmer, this was a pro—someone who'd feel insulted if he gallantly let her win. They

reached the end of the pool in a dead heat and their hands hit the tiles together.

"My God!" she said. "Do you know who you just tied, Mike? I was a bronze medalist in the sixty-four Olympics. Oh, damn!" She put her hand over her mouth. "Now I've gone and blown my age."

"And your name," Shayne said. "Why didn't you tell me you were Holly Tanner? Sure, I remember you. The big Russian chick fouled at the gun but the referee was Rumanian or Bulgarian and refused to disqualify her. You were robbed." His red brows knitted now. "There was something else, though... a scandal, back in the States."

"You're being very gallant not to remember, Mike," Holly Parker said. "There was a big to-do at the Pan American Games right afterward. One of my teammates told the officials I'd been taking pep pills before each race. They threw me out of the meet. They shot down my whole swimming career."

"They even tried to get my Olympic medal canceled, but they couldn't prove I'd done anything like that at the Games. Well, I was young and dumb, and I paid for it. What really hurt was the movie contract being canceled. They were going to make me the new Esther Williams."

"I'm sorry," said Shayne. "I didn't know."

"It's okay." She sighed. But there was a bitter turn to the corner of her lovely mouth and a hard glint in her nearsighted, meltingly beautiful eyes. "Mike—you might as well hear it from me as look it up later and know that I'd kept it from you."

The girl who ratted on me, who wrecked my career—was Annie Forsyth. When I ran into her here I couldn't believe my eyes. I still hated her. I wanted to kill her."

"Yes, Holly?" Shayne said.

"Mike, I have to tell you. She was calling herself Joan Renault."

X

THE THOUGHT KEPT running through Shayne's mind as he showered and dressed for the party, hearing through his open window the sounds of the carpenters' hammers as they hastily assembled wooden booths and a bandstand—most of the latter was prefab stuff, ready to assemble—for the evening's festivities.

Joan Renault? She kept turning up like the proverbial bad penny. She seemed to have had a way of fouling up every situation in which she found herself.

Well, she had certainly paid



for this negative talent in the dearest coin of all.

Another thought ran through his head—the thought of Manny Cordero out there in the scrub, waiting for dark—waiting for the chance to make good his threat against Mike Shayne. A threat easily fulfilled with darkness as cover, against a target that moved in the brightly lit area spreading from patio to pool.

He had all the chances of a sitting duck.

Buttoning his shirt, Shayne took a hard look at himself in the mirror. The face that looked back at him wasn't visibly afraid. *What the hell*, he thought. *You've made it this*

far. Still, he reminded himself, I'm mortal.

When he opened the door, the musicians were tuning up down by the dance floor, and a truck had brought up a huge barbecued pig, cooked overnight in a specially built stove on the premises and ready, now, for carving. The smell was heavenly.

Shayne realized that he was hungry enough to eat a full-sized boar himself. Damn it, it was going to be a good evening, all in all. Pleasant female company, pleasant dance music—the mariachis were already beginning to hum along as they tuned their guitars—plenty of good hearty food.

And a chance to catch a killer.

Shayne thought over his conversation with Segura. If Segura could smash Donato's operation, Mike Shayne's hat was off to him.

As he looked around, Elsie Hoffer—the Countess Esposito—came past carrying a glass ladle for the big matching punchbowl that was already set up on the long serving table. Her aristocratically made-up face seemed to have lost caste. The tony carriage, the high-stepper set of the chin, the uptown glint in the eye—these were beginning to crack at the edges.

"Elsie Hoffer," he called.

"Oh?" She started, then recovered. "Oh, Mike—could you do me a favor? Take this up to the punchbowl. The guests will be showing up any minute now."

Mike gripped her upper arms. "Elsie, damn it, get hold of yourself," he said. "You've got a show to run."

"B-but Mike, it's all coming apart."

"The hell it is," he said. "Tony's in the hospital for another couple of days. That means *you're* in charge. And for God's sake, you used to run a hell of a sight bigger scam than this, with thirty-six dealers working the floor and a floor show and six bouncers and—"

"Mike, I have this feeling something's gonna happen."

"So it happens," he said. "The thing is not to let whatever it is throw you. The show's yours to run. You've handled lots worse situations than this. Now get that chin up and run a ramrod up your back. Act like it's Saturday night and the high rollers are in town."

She looked up—and suddenly grinned, her old self again. "Damn right, pal. No way they can lick *me*. Thanks, Mike." She gave him a wave and turned on her heel, striding away with her old ebullience, putting the phony personality

back in place. Shayne smiled after her, hoping there would somehow be a way to let Elsie slip through the net when Segura and his men closed in. If, he told himself, she weren't in fact the killer they were looking for. . . .

XI

THE PARTY WAS OVER an hour old when it happened.

Mike Shayne had deliberately kept moving, as much to protect the people with whom he stopped and chatted as to reduce his own chances of being shot. It wouldn't at all do, for instance, to let Holly Parker or Esther Dumont monopolize his time. A bullet aimed at himself, and badly aimed, might well strike whoever happened to be standing next to him.

It put a cramp in his style somewhat—particularly since he found both women quite attractive. But there was a killer—Manny Cordero—out there.

In the area enclosed by the oaks and the fence was an accomplice to the killing to be reckoned with. There was also the matter of the missing witness.

Shayne reviewed the possibilities.

One was that Holly Parker was the witness.

One was that Esther Dumont was the witness.

One was that the witness had been Joan Renault, or whatever her real name was, and that she was dead.

Another possibility was that the witness was none of these.

Shayne somewhat doubted this last, mainly because the long arm of coincidence seemed to have reached out and roped all these people together. . . and he had found nothing to connect any other guest of the Rancho Del Mar with the big land-fraud case in Miami.

Except through the murder.

Somehow, the murder had to be solved. Until it was cleared up, Shayne would never be sure who the witness was—or had been. And sure was the only thing he could afford to be.

He sighed and rubbed his chin with a thumbnail. And he kept moving.

Esther Dumont was the first of the girls to waylay him as he approached the dance floor. "Mike," she said, "dance with me. You may be the old-fashioned type, but damn it, this is the twentieth century, and it's Leap Year. And if a woman can't tag a man to dance this late in the game."

"Did I say you couldn't?" Shayne said, holding out his arms. He moved in time with her across the floor among the

other couples, taking note of her graceful footwork and sure sense of time. The beat was pleasant without being obtrusive. It was good to dance to.

They danced past Elsie Hoffer; standing—her demeanor regally commanding again—and she shot him a smile. With, he decided, almost precisely the right touch of countessly hauteur. He approved.

"Oh, Mike," Esther Dumont murmured close to his ear, her trim body pressed tight against him, "I could go on forever like this."

Three shots rang out in rapid sequence.

After the first Mike Shayne, holding Dumont close, dived for the corner of the dance floor, where an unused trap drum and guitar amplifier stood. He cushioned her fall with his own big body, shoved her without further ceremony into the space behind the amp, and rolled into an alert crouch, the snub-nosed .38 he had borrowed from Segura in one hammy fist. He kept his head down, trying to figure out which direction the shots had come from—they seemed to have originated uncomfortably close by—awaiting the next shot.

After perhaps fifteen seconds had passed he stood up, holstering the gun under his coat. There wasn't going to be any

fourth shot for a while. The sniper had moved on, perhaps looking for an even better location to fire from.

And he looked around, past all the frightened faces, the men and women huddled, like Esther Dumont, on the dance floor, the musicians cradling their instruments under the bandstand.

The killer had claimed another victim.

Stretched out on the floor, her sightless eyes directed, for some reason, precisely at Mike Shayne, lay 'the Countess Esposito,' Elsie Hoffer. There was a red stain on the breast of her fashionably tailored dress. The slug that had caused it had been fired from a large-bore pistol.

There were cries from the darkness. "*Aquí! Aquí! Sigale! Y cuidado. . .*"

Segura's Federales were on the job. As Mike Shayne bent over Elsie Hoffer's prostrate body, a sound at his elbow caused him to look up sharply. Segura stood by his side.

"A pity!" Segura said. "I was looking forward to prosecuting her. There, is, I believe, a gringo proverb about playing with matches."

Shayne stood up. "True," he said, "but damn it, she had a good side, in spite of her record." He pulled at his earlobe,

his mouth tight, his eyes hard.

Segura shrugged. "Be that as it may, *Senor Shayne*, all I have to go on is her record since she entered my country as the wife of a criminal."

Shayne helped Esther Dumont up, said, "Esther, this is *Coronel Segura* of the Federal Police. He's here to see if he can nab Manny—and whoever his accomplice was."

"But Mike, this isn't a case of Cordero's eliminating a possible witness against him? It. . ." She caught a glimpse of Elsie's body then, with the gaping wound in her chest. She gagged and, holding her hand over her mouth, went to the railing of the dance-floor to bend over it in obvious distress.

"What do you think of the suggestion, Colonel?" Shayne said.

"I think," Segura said with a scowl, "that if we catch Cordero out there alive I will have more than one question to ask him. It may well be that he was not aiming at you. You are a large target, larger than *Senora Donato*. The shot came from surprisingly close by. I think the man I stationed here will have something to answer for."

Then, with a jerk of the head, curt but not offensive, he turned from the platform and motioned Shayne to follow. It didn't take long to find the der-

elict guard. Or, as it turned out, to find the reason for his dereliction. Somebody had sneaked up behind him and broken his neck, silent and barehanded.

XII

SEGURA SCOWLED. "Leave him here, *Senor Shayne*. Come, I must get on the car radio and call for the ambulance."

"Mike!" Esther Dumont cried from the platform above. "Mike, please—let me go with you. I'm frightened. I. . ." She regained her composure. "*Please!*" She came down the stairs, saw the body, looked away, struggled visibly with her weak stomach. This time she won—but she did not look at the body again.

Shayne looked at Segura. "Okay with you?"

"Sure." The stocky Mexican turned with military precision and strode away, evidently expecting them to follow. They did—although Esther's high heels fought her attempt to keep up with Shayne's long-legged strides.

As Segura came out of the arched entrance where the police cars stood parked, Shayne saw him stiffen and look around, silhouetted in the arch.

"*Aragon!*" he called. "*Tenente Aragon! Ven aca!*" He raised his

voice. "*Aragon! Donde estas?*"

There was no answering voice. Shayne saw Segura, lightning-fast, reach for his gun. As he did so, one of the police cars roared to life and spun around into the drive, skidding, toward the front gate and safety.

Segura ran to intercept it. The driver swerved and headed for him, trying to hit him. Segura leveled the pistol—then had to dive for cover behind a potted palm awaiting replanting beside the drive.

Shayne, fleet for his size, ran to Segura's side and squeezed off two shots in the direction of the careening automobile. Both shots missed—but they seemed to unnerve the driver. He went momentarily out of control. Far down the drive, the car skidded and came to a temporary halt, stalled.

"*Quick, Mike!*" Segura said. "One of the other cars."

But no—Look! He has opened the hoods and yanked the wires loose."

"*My car!*" Esther Dumont said, halfway out of breath her purse in one hand, a set of keys in the other. "*Here, Mike—use mine.*"

"Come on," Shayne dived into the front seat and ground the starter as Segura jumped in beside him. He was ready to put the car in gear when Esther

slipped into the back seat behind him. "*Hey!*" he said. "*Out! This is going to be dangerous.*"

"It's okay," Segura said. "She'll keep down, won't you *Senora?* Look, Mike! He's got the car started again!"

Shayne didn't wait for orders. He spun the car around on effortless power steering and gave it the gun. The long sleek automobile, its big engine roaring, leaped forward.

Shayne kept accelerating three quarters of the way to the main road. Then he braked judiciously, just enough to let him make a two-wheeled turn and roar into the main highway at something like half speed. Then he floored it, watching—in spite of this—the police car ahead of him increase the distance between them.

"Not much chance of catching him on the straightaway," Mike," Segura said. "That is my own car he has. It is, you might say, souped up. It will do a hundred and forty. But ahead lies traffic."

"The only road he can take that will allow him to escape traffic—and the chance of running into a real policeman—is one which winds its way into the foothills. On a curving road you can take him. My suspension is not in the best of shape and besides, you are a hell of a driver, I think."

"Thanks," Shayne said. "Hey, we're in luck. He's turning, all right!"

"Wonderful!" Segura said, the big gun in his hand. Shayne caught a glimpse of it. Segura didn't mess around with pop-guns. It was a big French MAB P15 pistol, chambered, he was sure, for the 9mm parabellum cartridge. That big baby had a 15-round magazine—more firepower than any pistol in the world.

The heavy-mustached Mexican spoke, his dark brows knit, his eyes mere slits. "This road he's taking—it is not finished. In a mile or so it becomes a rough dirt road, with potholes. My shock absorbers will not take that. He will not be able to handle it. We have him."

Then Segura had to brace himself with one hand as Shayne whipped the car into a racing turn, his thick wrists expertly tooling the wheel. Then he hit the accelerator again.

"Not bad," Segura said. "I spent three years as a boy with Joie Chitwood's show, and after that I don't think *anybody* can drive. But you are not bad." His eyes were on the road, his big gun ready. . . then he rushed the automatic out the window, his brown face behind it, aiming.

Before he could squeeze off a first round, the police car dis-



appeared into a dust cloud. "Brakes!" Segura shouted, and Shayne was quick to obey, wrestling the car to a stop.

Ahead of them, the other car hit the two-rut gravel road at a fearful pace, bounded into the air, hit with a bang, careened off a big rock, and went onto two wheels, out of control.

It bounced into the bush, off

the graded road, rolled once, twice, bounced again, and landed, top down, with a crunch of metal. They watched one wheel, sheared off, go bouncing back through the boojum trees and ocotillo, bounding crazily before coming to rest.

Then there was no sound but the purr of the engine of Esther's car.

Shayne was about to let out a long low whistle—when he spotted something in the searchlights glare, something which made him open the door and leap out. He was already running when his feet hit the ground.

Cordero had been thrown free. Shayne spotted him under a low-growing scrub bush. Careless of the consequences, he sprinted to the mobster's side. He had a hunch.

His hunch was right. Cordero, lying in a pool of his own blood, hadn't long to live. He looked up and blinked weakly.

"Shayne," he croaked. "It was the broad. I wasn't aiming at you."

That was all. His head fell to one side. Shayne stood looking at him, then bent over to check his pulse as Segura and Esther pulled up beside him. Esther took one look and turned away.

Segura looked down, his broad-cheeked Indian face impassive as ever behind the

thick mustache. "Did he say anything?" he said.

"He said, 'It was the broad.' That was all he had time for." Shayne stood up.

"Then the lady here was right. He was not aiming at you?"

"I guess not," Shayne said. "People who know they're dying seldom have time for thinking up lies. Well, that's that." He turned back to the car, taking Esther's arm.

"For now, it is," Segura said. "I mean it is all for Cordero. It is not all for me. Or Donato. Or you, either, I suspect. Could you give me a ride into Ciudad Juarez? I have to call in a report."

He looked at the wreck sadly. "Look at that car! The hours I put into fixing it. The money these criminals cost the taxpayers." He spat disgustedly into the brush.

They dropped Segura at police headquarters in Juarez, and Shayne wheeled the big car about, ready to return. Esther's hand on his left wrist stopped him.

"Mike," she said in a small voice. "Please! I can't go back there now. It's just too awful. Could you drive me into El Paso? I'll put up at a motel or something. I'll send for my things. I just couldn't go back to that place where so many

people have died. You understand?"

"I guess I do," he said. "But are you sure you want to go that far? I mean, after all, there are equally good accommodations in Juarez."

"Yes, but. . ."

"It doesn't matter to me," Shayne told her. "I'll take you wherever you like. I just thought I'd lay the alternatives out in front of you before you did anything rash."

"Rash?" She turned in the seat to look at Shayne's face in the reflected light of the gaudy neon sign advertising a popular cantina. "I don't understand."

"Sure you do," Shayne said. "Manny's dead. You think that makes you safe now."

"Safe? But you said he was shooting at the Countess."

"No I didn't." Shayne put the car in parking gear and let it idle. "I said he told me 'it was the broad.' That's ambiguous. There was more than one broad there, to use Manny's vulgar term. He may have hit Elsie, but he was shooting at you. For setting him up like that and then double-crossing him."

"What do you mean, Mike?" she said. "Setting him up? Double-crossing?" Her face was drawn.

"On-second thought, maybe you'd better get across the border. I'd hate to think how

you're going to be treated down here when the cops nail you on a murder charge as accessory before the fact. Or did you actually pull the trigger, Esther? Was it you or Manny? Not that it matters a hell of a lot. Either way they'll nail you, and hard, on this side of the border. Code Napoleon, remember? No presumption of innocence?"

"Mike! I thought you cared for me. . . ."

"I did, Esther. You're a nice girl in some ways. Even if you did try to frame me for the murder of Joan Renault."

"Frame? Mike, I don't know what you're talking about."

"The hell you don't! That's when the sentimentalism went out the window, baby. That's when I stopped the nice warm feelings every time I saw you. Hell, for two bits I'd leave you down here. Well, almost."

"I don't understand. Mike, please. Take me over to El Paso. I can't stay down here. I—"

"Damn right you can't. Donato will be out of the hospital in a day or two and when he finds out that you and Manny bumped off his girl friend, the one he was grooming to replace Elsie when he put her out to pasture. . . ." He made a finger-across-the-neck motion.

"You'd do that to me?" she said. "You'd hand me over to

Segura—or to Tony Donato?”

“You’re damn right I would!” Shayne said. She watched his features turn blue, then orange, then blue again in the flashing light. “Unless you do something to change my mind.”

Her eyes nervously scanned his face, then looked hard into his eyes. “Mike—I could be good to you. I really could... I’m very nice when you get to know me.” She put one soft hand on his wrist. Her lips were moist. Her eyes held infinite promise.

“Come on, now,” Shayne said. “You know damn well I don’t mean that. Esther, you’re way ahead of me. You got my meaning.”

“No, I didn’t.” The green eyes were moist with tears that refused to fall. “I don’t understand any of this. Why, Mike—Why would I want to kill Joan Renault?”

“Because she was on to you. Murdock—Hymie the Quack—you could twist around your finger, now. Hymie’s so spaced out these days all you have to do is talk nice to him and he’ll curl up in your lap like a cocker spaniel. The Renault woman was something else. She read the papers.

“As Murdock’s assistant she’d notice the face you brought in to the place and asked Hymie to change all around. Hell, they

printed that drawing the hairdresser gave me in the San Antonio paper last week. I was sure that would tip off my scam here. It did, as a matter of fact.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about you. Peggy Watkins. The missing witness in the Miami land-grab swindle, the witness I’m about to offer a deal.”

XIII

“DEAL?” SAID ESTHER DUMONT. “What kind of deal?”

“One,” Shayne said, “wherein I double-cross my good friend Armando Segura, the Mexican cop, and haul you across the border just as you asked me to. On one condition.”

“Condition?”

“You have two choices, two choices only, right now, Esther. Damn, I ought to call you Peggy. Force of habit. It doesn’t matter, though. As I say, you have two choices. That’s t-w-o. Don’t kid yourself that there are any other options in your bag.

“For instance, that little twenty-five caliber peashooter in your bag. You can point it at me and pull the trigger all you like, and it won’t do you any good. Check and see. I’m bluffing, of course. The day we

went to lunch, you left your purse on the chair next to me.

"While we were talking I went through it down in my lap. When I found a gun down there I broke it, flipped the cylinder and dumped the shells down into your purse. They're still there, I imagine. Women never check the bottom of their purses until they've lost something."

She didn't reach for the purse. "You suspected that early? But—"

"I suspected everybody. But I knew it was you when I figured out what to look for. Where you made your mistake, Esther, was getting your ears pierced here at the ranch."

"Ears?"

"Yes. You read the San Antonio paper, too, and you knew the suspect's description—*your* description. You knew they knew the color of the eyes, the hair... and that the witness's ears weren't pierced.

"Yours were when I met you—but just recently. You still have those little training bars in, the ones they put in to keep the hole from closing. They betrayed you. They drew my attention to your ears, Esther. And they gave you away."

"How?"

"You could color your hair or even replace it with a wig. You could put in different colored



contact lenses. But that last is tricky, particularly if you're color-blind, as you are. When I met you yesterday your eyes were brown. Now they're green. You put in the wrong pair. But no matter. Eyes or hair aren't positive IDs. Ears are."

"Ears?"

"The hairdresser had a good eye. He knew what to look for. Ears—the curlicues and curves of them, and the angle at which they join your head—are as individual as fingerprints. The hairdresser drew yours, and I wouldn't have noticed it if you hadn't had the dumb notion of piercing them.

"Oh, I suspected others. Holly Parker—but she washed out as a suspect when I found out her black hair was real—and that she couldn't wear contact

lenses. I even suspected the dead woman. . . until I remembered her ears had been pierced a long time before and she was wearing heavy hoops when I saw her dead.

"But I kept going back to the shape of the ears. They nail you, pal. You are *it*—and they want you in Miami to turn state's evidence. Which, believe me, is about as good a deal as you'll be able to swing down here. A couple of years off for good behavior. You won't even be too old when you get out."

"The other alternative?"

"A murder rap over here. And don't think you can cross the line with me and then ditch me. I talked to the El Paso cops this morning. They'll extradite. Miami can have you, as far as they're concerned."

"Mike."

"You think I don't have you nailed? What about motive for the murder? What motive did Manny have, except that you twisted him around your finger and bamboozled the poor sap into doing it? Joan Renault was blackmailing you, threatening to turn you in. You had him sap me, then moved the body to the patio.

"I was going to be the fall guy, but you had second thoughts. You knew damn well I wouldn't stand still and play the patsy for you the way

Manny would. So you moved it, and tried to throw suspicion on Elsie Hoffer. Remember? This afternoon? Before the party? When you told me Elsie was Donato's wife?"

"Mike, *please!*"

"What the hell do you think you're going to sweet-talk me into doing?" Shayne's voice was caustic. "Let you go? *Go and sin no more, Esther?* Forget it! Because of you Manny's dead, his punk is dead, Elsie's dead and Joan Renault is dead.

"I almost forgot the punk. He's dead because he was so protective of Manny. You passed the word to Donato that Manny had killed his girl. You didn't know I'd just tipped Donato off that Manny had been siphoning juice off the top in Donato's dope-smuggling business. The two things were enough to shove Donato over the edge.

"He pulled a gun, the punk got killed, Manny shot Donato and took it on the lam. If it weren't for that damned investigation in Florida I'd almost wish Manny *had* plugged you there at the fiesta. You had it coming if anybody did—A lot more than poor Elsie."

"What a thing to say! Mike, you don't—"

"I don't mean it? *Try* me. I've got half a mind to turn you over to Segura anyhow. I've got

a bad conscience about smuggling you off his turf. He's a pretty straight cop. But I signed on to bring in a witness, and I've got to try."

"Mike. . . ." Her voice was listless. "You said state's evidence? No amnesty?"

"I doubt it," Shayne said. "But the odds are that some consideration will be given at sentencing time. You did embezzle a wad, you know, and there are a lot of disappointed stockholders of that phony corporation of yours who'd like to know what happened to their money."

Esther Dumont sighed and looked up at him. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. Then she took a deep breath and held her pretty chin high and looked him in the eye. Her eyes were resolute under the colored contact lenses. "Okay, Mike," she said. "Let's go over the border."

"Atta girl," said Shayne, putting the car in gear.

He dropped her off with the El Paso police. The order for extradition was already on the chief's desk. Using the chief's phone, he called Miami, reversing charges to his office number. The number he called was Lucy Hamilton's.

"Hello," she said. "Michael?"

"Hi, angel. It's okay. Everything's in the bag. We've got our murderer."

"Wonderful—Tim's in the hall, on the extension phone. We've been on pins and needles. You. . . oh, look, it's only eleven-fifty, our time. And you have the whole thing? The witness?"

"She's in custody here in El Paso," Shayne said. "Will's request for extradition is approved. It's a piece of cake. She's the murderer, too—or an accessory. Under Mexican law it's pretty much the same—and the chief here offered her the same deal I did: go to Miami and spill the beans or we drop you back across the border and let the Federales have you."

"Mike?" Tim Rourke's voice broke in. "Look, damn it, I was gonna stay mad at you, but this is too good to pass up. Give me the outline and I'll call in a front-page squib for the bulldog edition. Enough to have Makeup give me a six-column flag and let me beat the day-lights out of the *Herald*."

"Okay." Shayne gave him the hard facts on the murder and finished with an update on the tale of the missing witness. "You think that'll hold you for now?"

Rourke's voice still had a slight edge on it. "Yes," he said grudgingly. There was a lot of *But, Mike. . .* behind the word, though, and Shayne waited ten beats before he heard Rourke

break back in and say, "But, Mike. . . ."

"Okay," said Shayne. "You want those films. Damn it, you know I gave my word."

"Yes, but—"

"Ever hear of a Mexican payoff, Tim?"

"Yeah. You sell some guns to the *bandido* fair and square, and he pays you off, and everything's ducky until the moment you walk out the door, and then he sticks you up with the guns you've sold him and takes the money he paid you. Why?"

"Well," Shayne said. "Lucy's going to drop the films in the mail to Mr. Donato in the morning."

"Damn it!"

"And when she gets back from the mailbox she's going to look in the drawer right behind the booze. Say, how was the whiskey?"

"Fine, Mike, but—"

"Anyhow, there'll be a manila envelope there with your name on it. Have fun with it."

"I don't understand."

"I promised Donato the films. I didn't say a damn thing about the originals." Shayne waited in silence for another ten beats after that one. "Lucy, pour Tim a drink."

"He had one in his hand," she said. "Michael, he just poured four fingers of it down as if it were water. Is that safe? Anyhow, he just went out the door, muttering something about banners and replates and something else I didn't catch. I guess he'll drop by to thank you in the morning."

"It's okay," Shayne said. "Burn two xeroxes of the originals before you hand them to him. Save one for Segura and the other for Will Gentry."

"And another for our files," she said. "It's a complicated case. All these overlapping aspects. I'm wondering what to file it under."

"Well," Shayne said, an Irish grin breaking through, "the murder victim was putting the squeeze on the person who killed her. You might call it 'the Case of the Dead Wringer'."

Next Month's Headliner

TARGET—MIKE SHAYNE by BRETT HALLIDAY

The New Mike Shayne Novelet

THE LOGGING ROAD



by YVONNE GERALD

Rogers wasn't geared for violence. His passenger was.

DR. ROGERS CASHED a check at the bank, got in his car and headed home. In the bank a mob of customers and bank personnel had been talking excitedly. He had picked up the

fact that the bank was robbed sometime that morning, that the bank guard was knocked on the head with a gun, that the thief got away.

All this tired him. He was

glad to get out of it and head home. His psychology classes at the university were behind him for the day. Ahead of him lay a good hot dinner and an evening of relaxation.

His wife, Louise, made the best barbecue sauce he ever—

Suddenly Dr. Rogers felt something against the back of his neck. He knew what it was without even turning his head—the reptile-cold inflexibility of a gun muzzle.

At the same time a hoarse voice said, almost in his ear, "Don't turn around. Just keep driving like nothing was wrong."

Rogers obeyed. Eyes rigidly front, he said, "I know who you are. You robbed the bank, and you got into my car while I was inside."

This drew a chattering, mirthless laugh, then, "Right on, man!"

The muzzle pressed more insistently and coldly against his neck. Rogers moved his head to relieve the tension in his neck muscles.

"Where you headed?" asked the voice.

"University Park—about ten blocks from here.

"That where you live?"

"Yes."

A pause. Then, "Anybody miss you if you don't get there on time?"

"My wife. She's cooking dinner."

"Okay," the voice cut in harshly. "You're going to be a little late. Listen. The next two blocks, at the signal light, you turn right, get on the highway heading east. See? I got friends out of Hood River and you're going to take me to them. You got that?"

"Yes," said Rogers.

The street was deserted for the moment, and Rogers heard a scuffling sound, felt the back of the car seat give as the man slid down beside him, holding a now visible gun pointed at his head.

Rogers glanced over at him. He was about thirty-five, Rogers guessed, dressed in blue jeans and a leather jacket.

His face was dark and blunt, with the thin, humorless mouth and wary eyes of the innate loner.

In his free hand he carried a small battered suitcase which he thrust between his side of the car seat and the door.

He watched Rogers for a long moment, then said, "Okay, now you've seen me, and that might change a few things later on. For right now, if anybody stops us, I'm your friend, and we're going home to dinner at your house, both of us. I wore a ski mask at the bank, and didn't nobody see my face, so we

might get away with it." He took off his leather jacket. "Now we're going to change coats.

Rogers looked at him blankly.

"Now!" said the man.

Rogers struggled out of his coat, holding the steering wheel with one hand, and put on the leather jacket while the man put on Rogers' coat.

"Now, we're set for a while," said the man.

Rogers was silent. They passed Marigold Street—*his* street—where he should have turned off. Instead he drove on and at the signal light turned right and headed for the Columbia River Freeway.

"Where you going?" the man asked with sudden suspicion.

"To the freeway," said Rogers. "Isn't that where you wanted to go? It's the quickest way to get to Hood River."

Without warning, the man struck him across the right forearm with his gun. Rogers gritted his teeth against the pain. "You try anything like that again, and I'll blow your head off," he snarled. "You're trying to get us stopped by the Highway Patrol, *right?*"

"I wasn't trying anything," said Rogers, his voice trembling. "I just didn't think of that, that's all."

The man settled back: "All

right. We don't go the freeway. There must be a country road somewhere we could take."

"I know one," said Rogers. "It's about five miles from here. It's a logging road. It's not paved, and it's bumpy in spots. But there aren't any patrols or police on it."

"Okay. We take that one. And just remember"—the man raised his gun threateningly—"don't try anything cute."

Rogers was silent. He could feel fear racing through him and he realized that for the first time in his life he was up against a situation he did not know how to handle.

He had often wondered what he would do if something like this happened. Well, now he knew—*nothing*. His whole body felt like mush and his thoughts were a confused zero. He had to face it. He couldn't handle a crisis like this—he wasn't conditioned to it.

He was an urban man, a true child of civilization. He wasn't used to violence—it was as alien to him as a foreign language. He tried to think of something he could do, but his mind was a blank.

The man was watching him with contemptuous amusement. "What's your name?" he asked abruptly.

"Rogers," said Rogers. "Dr. Lloyd Rogers."

"Doctor?" said the man with mock admiration. "Hospitals—things like that?"

"No," said Rogers. "I'm a teacher. I teach psychology at a local college."

The man burst into his chattering laugh. "*Psychology!* You going to use psychology on me, Doc? You going to tell me how I think wrong about things?"

He stopped laughing abruptly and leaned forward, pushing his face into Rogers'. "Well, you better not." His eyes narrowed and he bared his upper teeth, distorting his face into a mask of hatred.

"You rich bastards!" he said. "I hate your guts!" He turned away, settled back into his seat and was silent a moment. Then he turned again toward Rogers.

"Okay. Since you give me your name, and we're going to be together for a while, mine's Dan King. That ain't my real name—just the name I'm going by now. So it don't matter. But it'll do for something to call me by."

He turned away, and again looked out the car window, idly gnawing his thick, dirty fingernails.

Rogers drove on, trying to think of a way out. Suppose he speeded up suddenly and threw King off balance? Could he grab the gun in time? Suppose he stopped, opened the door and

ran. No. King would gun him down before he got five yards.

King suddenly gave an amused, contemptuous laugh. "I wouldn't try it, mister. I know your kind. I seen that look before. You was trying to think of a way to get away from me, wasn't you? Well, you can't do it."

He laughed again, then said, "You born rich? Your ma and pa give you everything, didn't they? Never had to go without nothing, never got beaten up by your old man so you couldn't see straight, just because he was hitting the bottle, never seen your ma get beaten up for the same reason?"

He spat on the floor of the car. "No. You rich kids had everything from the word go."

"My father was an alcoholic, too," said Rogers. "We lived in a tenement apartment when I was a kid, and it got so cold because he didn't pay the gas bill that my mother got pneumonia and died."

King looked at him unbelievably. "You're *lying!* You're lying to me. Nobody gets to be rich like you without they get some help from somewhere."

"I worked my way through college and medical school," said Rogers. "My mother died when I was twelve. My father died when I was fifteen. I went to school nights. The only help

I had was a scholarship I earned myself."

Rogers turned right at a street marked *Meadows Road*.

King was instantly alert and suspicious. "Where you going now?" he said, lifting the gun.

"You said you wanted us off the freeway. Up here about a mile ahead, there's a logging road that turns off into the woods and goes across a mountain pass and comes back into Hood River from the south."

King grunted. "Okay. Just don't try no tricks."

Rogers didn't answer. He didn't know how long he had, but he knew King was going to kill him. Sooner or later, he'd have to. King was a typical loner, a child still, full to the brim of his own hatred and insecurity, taking it out on the world. A psychotic type...

Rogers smiled grimly. He felt he knew King as well as he did himself in a way, because, in a way, King *was* himself. The only difference between them was that he had managed to take one step King hadn't—to break with his past and take control of his own life.

Up ahead was a narrow break in the solid walls of firs—an unpaved road curving back through a corridor of trees, up the side of the mountain.

"Wait a minute," said King

when Rogers pulled up to the road.

Rogers stopped the car, and King peered ahead.

"That don't look like a very good road. You sure this car can take a road like that? I don't want us to get up there and break down." He paused, added, "I just might have to kill you and go on my own, because I sure don't want to have to look after you up on no mountain."

"I-told you it was a logging road. If you don't want to take it, we won't."

King turned to peer at the road once again, and when he did Rogers grabbed his arm and tried to wrest the gun away from him.

With surprising strength, King flung him off. Then he was all over Rogers like a big animal, beating him with the clubs of his hands, his feet, his gun.

Rogers went down on the seat under the steering wheel. The blows exploded in his head like bombs. Then they stopped. He heard King's breath laboring in his lungs, and his shadow drew away from Rogers.

"All right," he snapped, panting, "get up!"

Rogers sat up dizzily and looked at him. King's face was flushed and there was a sadistic joy in his eyes that Rogers un-

derstood only too well. King had proved his superiority by drawing blood—the only superiority he respected.

It was probably this perverted joy that had saved his life, Rogers thought. King had taken a little bit of his hair-trigger hate out on Rogers' skin and, for a while, he could afford to let him live.

"You do that again, Doc," he said, "and I'll kill you. You know that—don't you?"

Rogers nodded, and winced with the pain. "I know it."

"Okay." King motioned with the gun. "Get the car moving."

Rogers shifted gears, put the car in low and began the ascent up the steeply inclined road. His whole body was trembling, and he felt stiff and sore like an old man. When he glimpsed himself in the rear-view mirror he felt a sense of shock.

THERE WAS a cut on his right cheek and over his right eye, which was already swelling shut. His ribs felt as if they had been kicked by a mule.

He realized he could not save himself by violence. He didn't believe King was stronger than he was physically, but King was conditioned to fighting, he was ready for it—and what was even more on his side—he liked it.

The only weapons Rogers had

left were psychology and empathy.

He began to watch King fur-tively. Under the surface, at least, they were alike. As a child, King had been molded into a walking bomb by hate for his father.

Rogers thought back over his own childhood when he had been hurt beyond the hurt normal to all children—the hurt of being powerless, dependent for all the good things in life on the fragile mortality of two imperfect creatures—his parents—who could, without his having any control over it, make his life a heaven or hell.

His had been a hell-like King's.

He had had to teach himself to let go of the knowledge he had gained as a child—all of it negative—and there now remained only an occasional twinge of pain when memory prodded a sensitive scar.

But he still did have scars—areas of defensiveness, anger and fear—phobias that ruled him, insane fears he could not control.

He knew King had these weaknesses, too. If he could find just one that ruled the man...

King had turned away from him and was looking out the car window, moving restlessly in his seat. He turned his head

and caught Rogers studying him. "What are you looking at?" he demanded.

"Nothing," said Rogers.

"You look at the road," ordered King. "This ain't no kind of road for a car like this. You need a jeep to travel a road like this."

Rogers had to agree with him. He had only been over the road once many years ago with a friend, and it had been in a jeep. He remembered the road as rough and narrow then. It was even worse now. In some places it was almost completely unimproved, with ruts and rocks in the roadbed that Rogers had to drive around carefully.

In others it narrowed to a one-car width with a vertical cliff towering over then on one side and a straight drop of a thousand feet on the other.

Rogers slowed almost to a crawl, and King did not object. They passed a sign that said *Sunken Grade*.

"What's that mean?" asked King.

"It means they probably had an avalanche somewhere below the road."

He drove carefully onto the obvious dip in the road, feeling his own flesh crawl apprehensively. He noticed that King was clinging to the handle of the car door on his side.



Something about the expression on his face snapped a switch in Rogers' mind. If he could get one more sign of proof, he'd have it!

When they got over the sunken grade, he speeded up a little. The road climbed steadily. At times, on the curves, they seemed to be almost hanging in mid-air over sickening emptiness. A thousand feet straight down, there was a carpet of fir trees, looking like teeth in an opened shark's mouth.

On toward the horizon, like green waves, flowed range after mountain range, until out against the last blue rampart Mount Hood itself reared.

King didn't look at Mount Hood. He swung away from the window. The look of sadistic pleasure came into his eyes, and Rogers knew he was going to divert himself by harassing him again.

"So your old man was a drunk, too?" said King.

"Yes."

The chattering laugh again. "Kind of gets to you, thinking about it—doesn't it? Kind of makes you feel like there ain't no safe place anywhere in the world." King's mouth tightened, his eyes grew hard. He put up one hand and gnawed his nails again.

No safe place! That was the key, thought Rogers. Fear and insecurity—twin brothers. Fear was everywhere when you were insecure—fear and hate.

He was watching King now, with a thought that came and went, came and went, just on the edge of his consciousness, like a ringing in his ears.

While King talked, he suddenly speeded up. The tires screeched and skidded on the graveled road, and the car swung out toward the precipice.

King gripped the side of the door. "Watch it!" he said harshly. "I don't care about you, but I want to get where I'm going in one piece, if I have to kill you and take this car there myself—understand?"

Rogers said nothing.

They were approaching a sign that read, *Caution—Watch for Rocks. Narrow Road.*

Nearly half the road had been torn away and hurled down the mountain side. What was left had been edged with wooden road-horses carrying flashing

yellow caution lights. It was barely wide enough for the wheels of one car to pass.

Rogers slowed to ten miles per hour and inched the car out on the flaw. He could feel the tires shift under him on the treacherous loose rock.

King gave a sudden cry of pain and began cursing. "What kind of lousy junk heap you got here?" he said petulantly. "I hold on to the handle of this here door and it breaks off in my hand and cuts the hell out of me." He pulled a dirty handkerchief out of his pocket and began tying it around his injured hand.

THE SIGN, thought Rogers. That was it!

He drove off the defective road, put the car into low and began to climb the steep ascent. The summit of the pass was not too far away.

At the summit he had to take his chance, armed only with the still unknown and fragile weapons of the human mind. If he was right about King, the latter wouldn't put up any fight. If he was wrong—then King would kill him.

He glanced at King from the corner of his eye. He sat still, petulantly adjusting the handkerchief on his hand.

They were nearly at the summit now. The road made a

hairpin turn there, the road on one side abutted by a sheer cliff. On the other, it swung out over the valley below.

They climbed the hill and began the turn.

Rogers gritted his teeth. Crazy disconnected thoughts skimmed through his mind.

Now!

Rogers pushed the gas pedal down to the floor. The car jumped like a startled deer and spun, fishtailing on the loose rocks as it rounded the turn. Rogers spun the wheel and the car bounced and skittered toward the precipice.

Rogers heard King's howl of terror, saw him clawing madly at the handle-less door in a futile effort to escape, felt the car like a lunatic animal twisting and lunging—felt himself, instinctively and without the slightest deliberate action, jam on the brakes, felt the car shudder in tortured obedience, make a half turn—

He suddenly realized they was motionless, that he—or somebody—*had* stopped the car.

Its right front wheel hung over the edge of the cliff, resting on its axle, so that King's door—had he been able to open it—would have opened onto stomach-shaking emptiness.

For a moment Rogers sat, could only sit there, hearing somebody—at first he thought

it might be himself—sobbing. Then somebody screaming.

He realized it was King. King lay on the floor of the car, curled up like a foetus in the womb, screaming and sobbing.

Oh, I know, thought Rogers, almost with pity.

The nauseating emptying of yourself—when your bones, veins and muscles seem trembling inside your body like reflections in water. The thousand, thousand times you fall from the burning sky, screaming.

Oh, he knew.

Acrophobia, the curse of the insecure, the fear of high places.

— He knew, because he had it, too. That scar, the one scar he couldn't heal completely, the one beautiful virtue he had lost forever.

He would never know that, and neither would King. King had given himself away when he gripped the door handle so hard he broke it.

Rogers forced his stiff fingers to relax their grip on the wheel. Then he picked up the forty-five that King had flung on the seat between them.

Back down the road about half a mile, hidden back in the trees, was a cabin that loggers used during timber cutting season. Rogers remembered that it had a spur phone line, through which he could call the sheriff.

VISITOR FROM BANGLADESH

by ERNEST SAVAGE

After seven years, Tina Marie was still a very beautiful woman. After seven years, I was still in love with her. But Tina Marie had come halfway around the world to sue him for half a million.

FROM THE FIRST SOUND of her voice over the phone I knew who it was and my heart went thump and then stopped for a beat. I hadn't seen her or spoken to her for over seven years, but the heart thought it was yesterday.

She said, "Is this Sam Train?" and she probably heard the involuntary intake of my breath before I could answer thinly, "Yes. Tina—Tina." A statement, not a question—and she liked it that I knew in-

stantly who she was. Later, she told me her heart was high in her throat too, the hand holding the phone damp.

She wanted to see me. She said it was terribly important. She would give me no details over the phone, except it was, of course, about her brother Andy, who had been knifed to death in San Quentin a few weeks ago. I took three or four good deep breaths after she'd hung up.

She had a first-floor apart-

A NEW SAM TRAIN STORY



ment on Turk Blvd. near Arguello, about 10 minutes from my place. When I twisted the little ring gadget in the front door I heard her holler to come in and I did. She was seated on a couch next to a table that held the phone.

Her left leg was propped up on an ottoman. It was encased in plaster from foot to mid-thigh, crutches alongside her on the couch. She looked pale, and her big luminous eyes were bluer than I remembered. I wanted to walk over and take her in my arms, but stood rooted to the floor.

"What happened?" I said.

"I broke it last month at Innsbruck. I'm not as good as I thought I was, Sam. I hit a tree." The same voice, low, throaty.

"I'm sorry, baby." I moved then and bent to kiss her, but she turned her head aside, the pale golden hair whipping a little.

"Later," she said, "if you want to. But you won't want to, Sam."

"I'll always want to. I'll never quit wanting to."

She lit a cigaret, the first I'd ever seen her smoke. She'd changed—she was harder, the lovely eyes shrewder. The seven years had been tough on everyone in the world, Tina Marie Brasselle no exception.

"When did you get in town?" I said.

"Yesterday afternoon."

"From Geneva?"

"Yes—via New York." She saw the question in my eyes. "Ed Bronson rented this dump for me. Nice, isn't it? He met me at the airport. We're going to sue you, Sam. You and the Sovereign State of California."

I sat in a lumpy over-stuffed chair facing her across the narrow room. Bronson was the lawyer who'd defended her brother at his trial for bank robbery seven years ago. He is one of the two or three men in San Francisco that I genuinely hate—and the feeling is mutual. I had an inkling of what was coming.

"For what, Tina?"

"Oh a number of things, Sam. False arrest—suborning witnesses—suppressing evidence—unlawful death—five million dollars. There's quite a list. Her eyes hadn't left mine. They looked shadowed and weary.

"Everything but the broken leg, huh? Was it your idea or Bronson's?"

"His, but I like it. He's got a very powerful case. He thinks we can sue for five million and collect maybe five hundred thousand. I want the money, Sam."

She'd changed. Lord, how she'd changed! I groped. "Did

they give you the boot, or what?"

"No! You don't get fired from the World Health Organization, you just get sick to death of it and quit! The blue eyes flamed.

"The world is dying, Sam, and no matter how many shots we give it or pills we cram down its throat, it's going to keep on dying. They want me to go back to Bangladesh and I won't—I can't!" She almost spat it. "I can't look one more tubercular baby in the eyes again—*ever!*"

The speech sounded rehearsed, but there was the same intensity in her voice I remembered from seven years ago, the same true ring. She'd been dedicated then. She'd come to San Francisco directly from the Congo for her brother's trial and had gone back when it was over, eager to get on with her work. She thought it was a winning fight then.

"You're burned out," I told her. "It happens to you zealous types, baby. You'll get it back."

"I don't *want* it back!"

"Did you decide that before or after you busted your leg?"

"That's a cop question, Sam. I decided long ago. The opportunity didn't present itself until just now."

I sighed. I don't understand love. I was still rattled just from seeing her, from hearing her voice, no matter what it said. She was out to make big

trouble for me, but all I could think of was taking her down the coast to Carmel, where we'd spent the one week of my life that can't ever be lived again, or forgotten, or defiled.

"When Andy got killed last month," I said, "I read a statement that Bronson made for the papers, but I thought it was just his sick ego on the march again. He called Andy a 'martyr', the victim of one of the cruelest miscarriages of justice ever to besmirch the courts of this fair state, or some such crap. Are you telling me you believe that, Tina?"

"It's true. Andy professed his innocence to the day he died."

"That was just strategy. The quarter million he hooked was never recovered—did you know that? If he had people convinced he was innocent, it would be easier for him to pick it up after he got out."

She wasn't tracking me. "He would have been paroled next year," she said. "That's what's so goddam cruel about it."

There were tears in her eyes, and I wanted to go over and hold her in my arms again. She was hurting. She'd loved her brother, there was no doubt about that. She'd been 21 and he 14 when their parents had died. She'd raised him, been mother, father and big sister to him.

She didn't know—or didn't believe—what I knew about him, that he was bad news all the way. She didn't know—or didn't believe—that he'd pushed dope all over the Haight-Asbury in its heyday, that he'd knifed a girl half to death in a drunken rage, that he was part of a hi-jacking ring when I'd nailed him.

The trouble was he had a face like Christ himself, and eyes like his sister's that you could fall into and lose yourself. During his trial the flower children of that time held parades for him and sat in front of the courthouse like the Manson girls. He had star quality, but his second lead was always death. She didn't know that.

She dried her eyes and made them hard and shadowed again as they locked on mine. "Bronson wrote me a letter last month while I was still in the hospital in Geneva," she said. "Andy had been dead about a week and I didn't care if I got up again or not, Sam." Her head cocked with a touch of wistfulness. "I almost wrote you—"

"Why didn't you? I would have come."

"But instead," she said, "Bronson's letter came and there was suddenly light at the end of the tunnel. It's odd," she added, "how quickly money—if

there's enough of it—can change your view of things. Maybe it's evil, Sam—I don't know—but it works. I can come out of this thing with a quarter million or more. All I'll ever need. I want it."

"Keep telling me that and maybe I'll believe you," I said harshly. "But you can't have any kind of a case, baby. Bronson—"

"He found the woman."

"What woman?"

"The one Andy claimed he was with at the time of the robbery. The one you and I looked for but didn't find."

"Oh, Jesus!" I said. We'd looked all right, or at least she had, but we didn't find her because she didn't exist. Andy had invented her to implement his plea of innocence. But Tina, believing him, had searched for her up and down the coast from Eureka to San Luis Obispo, and I'd gone along—on weekends and days off—just to be with her. I would have looked for dead whales just to be with her. I shook my head.

"He bought someone," I said.

"No. He told me she came forth voluntarily when she read of Andy's being killed. She said her conscience couldn't live with it any longer. It's in his letter."

"Bull feathers, Tina."

"She said you paid her to

stay away because you didn't want your case to fall apart. It's in the letter, Sam. I'm sorry."

"Show it to me."

She had Bronson's letter beside her on the couch. I got up and got it, two pages typed in single space. It was a diatribe, partly aimed at me, partly at the world at large. He was a shyster, paranoid with greed and self-esteem. He had set himself up years ago as the defender of the poor, the dispossessed and unwanted.

He affected Colombo clothes to establish his oneness with his clientele and wore his hair long and unwashed like theirs, his heavy horn-rimmed glasses usually riding on top of it like earphones. He was a parcel of shabby affectations and slick deceptions. Twice he'd been brought up for disbarment but had beaten the rap both times. He'd ripped off a lot of money down through the years. I was not alone in hating him.

I stopped reading halfway through. I was standing in the middle of the room now. Tina's eyes were wide and patient watching me. "Baby," I said, "does this dung-heap lawyer of yours know that I love you?"

It surprised her. She looked away. "Do you, Sam? I thought it was just a passing fancy."

"For me, it wasn't. For me, it stuck."

"It was a fluke. It should never have happened."

"But it did."

"We were on opposite sides." Her eyes flashed. "You wanted to put my brother in jail."

"I was a cop then, doing a cop's job. I had no choice. Just as I had no choice but to fall in love with you."

"It was finished seven years ago."

"No, it's alive and well, and you know it. Answer my question—does Bronson know I love you?"

"No. Nobody ever knew that. Read the rest of the letter," she said.

I did and then sat down again in the lumpy chair. If Bronson had what he claimed he had, then I was well and truly framed. Down through the years when I was a cop, evidence I had gathered had beaten him in court four times, including Andy's case. I'd cost him a lot of money and a lot of pride.

One day, outside the courthouse, he told me he was going to break my ass. We were eyeball to eyeball on the sidewalk. I reached up and pulled his glasses down from his hair and planted them firmly on the bridge of his nose, and a *Chronicle* photographer caught the scene. The next morning there was a two-

column picture of it on page three.

"If you wore these things where they belong," I told Bronson, "you could see the brick wall you're about to run into. Up your nose, counselor."

"Well?" Tina said.

"I've got a few hundred shares of AT&T stock," I said. "I've got ten paintings hanging on my apartment walls that are worth maybe fifteen grand—you saw some of them. I've got four suits of clothes and a lot of books and a three-hundred dollar water bed. I've got a five-year-old Dart automobile and a cabin in the mountains.

"If he makes this stick, all of that wouldn't even buy my lawyers, and I'd end up in jail for suborning a witness. Is *that* what you want? I know it's what he wants, but do you want it too?"

She shook her head. "No. But I want the money." Her eyes flashed a kind of eagerness, a touch of greed. "Have we got a case, Sam?"

"Probably," I said coldly. Greed is in us all. I've known its lure myself, any cop has. You have to watch it like a cobra. It depends upon how well-coached and well-paid and strong-willed this witness of his is, and I'm sure she's all of that or he wouldn't be ready to go. He's got her and he's got you,

and you could deceive God himself. You've got a case."

I stood up and felt heat suddenly gather around my eyes. It had been less than an hour since I'd heard her voice on the phone, and this couldn't be happening. What we'd had between us seven years ago had been too valuable for any measure of greed to match.

I'd first seen her in the crowded hall outside the courtroom where her brother was being tried. I didn't know who she was. Our eyes met and locked and it was a done thing. I felt as though I'd had a lobotomy. Inside the courtroom—even though I knew who she was then—I sent her a note asking to see her and named a time and place. I didn't sign it, but she knew who I was by then too and she came.

For the three remaining weeks of the trial we were together as much as we could be. The week after, before she returned to the Congo, we were together in Carmel twenty-four flashing hours a day. As she said, it was a fluke, but it had happened and nothing like it had, or could happen again.

She had a mocking smile on her face. "Good," she said. "I thought we did or I wouldn't have put myself through the trip." She started to get up, but

I didn't move to help her. She lifted her leg from the ottoman with both hands and dropped it to the floor with a clunk that made her wince.

"It itches like hell," she said conversationally, "and it's beginning to stink. You can't wash yourself properly, Sam. It's been on there six weeks. I think it's dead inside." She used her crutch to hoist herself up from the sagging couch and winced again. It kind of pleased me. "Thanks," she said, grinning like a skull. "You're trapped, aren't you, Sam?"

It wasn't a real question and I didn't answer it.

"But you'll fight it to the bitter end, your last dime." /

"That's what I'll do."

"So even if you win in the end, you'll lose. Your stock and all that—"

"That's how it'll be, Tina. Money doesn't mean quite that much to me."

"Justice means more? God! what an old-fashioned man you are—and what an absolute bloody fool!"

"It used to mean something to you too, baby. You used to cry at the injustice of all those sick kids around the world."

"Yes, I used to, but no more, Sam." She winced again and her voice crackled. "There are more of them now than there were when I started. Sixty



cents out of every dollar the World Health Organization spends goes in some dirty politician's pocket. Where's the justice in that? There's no jus-

tice anywhere, just greed, corruption."

"So if you can't beat 'em, you'll join 'em."

She clumped around the otoman and stood in front of me. She wasn't good with the crutches yet, but she would become good, because that's the way she was. She had an athlete's body, tall and lithe and free-moving. It looked a little heavy now. "You hate me now, don't you?" she said. "I told you you wouldn't want to kiss me."

"I hate what you're doing. You'll hate it later yourself, Tina."

"Sam, I can't go back. You *must* understand, I can't go back."

"Why? Because it got a little tough and you got a little tired? Don't give me that crap about a few greedy politicians driving you off the field."

"No, because it stinks—because we're doing no good. The world is going to hell in a handcart and I just want to sit somewhere quietly for the rest of my life and let it happen. I don't want to try to stop it anymore."

"Let someone else do the dirty work, right?" I turned away from her because I could see what was happening and wanted no part of it. I'd quit the San Francisco Police Force

because I disagreed with the strike and I'd paid heavily for it ever since. But if you abandon your principles, you leave the best part of you dead on the field and you begin to avoid the zombie in the mirror.

It's no way to live—but, turning back, I could see it in her, deep in those glorious eyes, the plea to be understood and forgiven, the beginning of a craven whine. I couldn't look at it. I turned again.

"See you in court," I said, and walked to the door.

She called my name when I had it open and I turned again. "Don't go yet," she said. "There's something else I want you to see." She was fumbling in the pocket of her jacket. "This." It was a folded piece of paper.

I walked back and took it and read it. It was a pencil-sketched map with some typewritten directions beneath. It showed where the money Andy had stolen was buried, and how to get to it. I looked up and we stared at each other for the best part of a minute before her eyes fell. Heat was building behind mine again.

"I had to," she said. "I had to take your alternative away."

"Where did you get this information?"

"In a letter Andy wrote me."

"From jail?"

"No—before you caught him."

"So you knew he was guilty all through the trial."

"No!" She forgot she was on crutches and tried to step forward and almost fell. I had no impulse to help her. "No! It caught up with me in the Congo at Kinshasa after I got back. He sent it to my address in Geneva. Sam, I *didn't* know."

"Where's the letter?"

"I have it."

"Let me see it."

"You know I can't do that."

I grinned. It was either that or kick the crutches out from under her arms. "So the deal is I go get this loot and you'll trade me the letter for it. Then Bronson can't make his move against me."

"Yes. Sam, I'm not proud of it, but there was nothing else I could do."

"You could have turned Andy's letter over to the authorities, or to me."

"Would you have in my place? Betray your own brother?"

"All right, probably not."

"It wasn't easy to do, Sam, I want you to believe that. In those days I had a more traditional sense of right and wrong. But I've seen so damn much venality since then and read about so damn many white collar big-shots who routinely rip off millions and don't even get their wrists slapped, that I feel

no qualms at all about it now. I *know* I did the right thing. It was his money, he *earned* it. It became mine only because he died."

"I don't buy that, baby. That's the morality of chaos. That's the end game, Tina, every man for himself and to hell with the law. I'm not ready to play it yet. What if I simply give the money back to the Bayshore National, where it belongs? Assuming I find it."

"How would you explain where you got it? I would deny, of course, ever having seen that note you've got in your hand. That's why it's typed. Bronson would love to have you do it, I think. It would open up a whole new can of worms for him."

"You've thought it out, haven't you?"

"To the end, Sam." She hobbled a step towards me. "And it could be a good end—for both of us. There's never been anyone like you for me." She laid her right hand on my chest, teetering a little.

"I hated doing this, dear man, but don't you see, it could be for both of us. What's left for you here? Your life was the Force, and that's gone now. Bronson told me about your fight with them over the strike. I know places we could go, darling, lovely, quiet places—be together, Sam."

The blue eyes were wide and deep as mountain pools. They'd been like that seven years ago when she'd asked me to help find the missing woman and I'd gone with her even though I knew the woman didn't exist. Did the lovely quiet places exist or were they illusions, too—vain hopes?

I peeled her hand from my chest. "I fell into those eyes of yours once before," I said, "and I'm glad I did. But once is enough, Tina Marie, it's all one man can stand. I won't go with you, but I'll probably wish I had. You're something, baby, concrete leg and all."

"Then...?"

"Yes, I know. One way or another, you're going to leave town with a quarter million illicit bucks, even if it means hanging me high. You're really something, Tina Marie."

I looked at the map again. It had the word *Clausen* written on it near an intersection of lines indicating roads. I remembered. It was where she and Andy had been living when their parents were killed. It was in 49er country and they were still working some of the mines in those years, but no longer.

The map indicated a building marked *our old house*, and behind it several rows of circles labeled *apple trees*, and behind

one of the trees an *X*-marking the loot. I knew Clausen. I'd gone through it a couple of times on gold-panning expeditions.

But Clausen was a ghost town now, one tiny general store still operating in the old post office building. In its hey-day, 20,000 people had gathered there, but now there were maybe fifty. I sighed. I was full of doubts and fears.

"Who lives in your house now?"

"Probably no one. It was nothing but a shack then."

"Who owns it?"

"I don't know—probably the state."

I sighed again. "What did Andy put the money in?"

"I don't know, Sam." She shrugged.

"A sack, a box, a wooden chest—a metal chest, a suitcase?"

"I don't know. He didn't tell me."

"What if it's gone? What if somebody found it? What if it's rotted to mush? What if the gophers ate it?"

She just looked at me.

"What about it, Tina? *What if it's gone?*"

"One way or the other, Sam—"

"You leave town with a quarter million—right?"

"Please understand. I won't

go back without it, I *can't* go back without it!"

She meant it. I turned and walked out the door before I did something no man is supposed to do to a woman. I thought I heard her say, "Good luck." My eyes were hot again.

IT WAS JUST A LITTLE after nine o'clock. I sat in my car at the curb and looked at my watch and could hardly believe I'd spent less than an hour with her. So much had happened, so many treasured old fantasies laid to rest, it had seemed like years.

I started the car. If I tried real hard and ignored one or two laws, I could be in Clausen by eleven-thirty. I had a pick and shovel at the apartment, along with other amateur mining equipment. I would take along an old gladstone bag I had, just in case there was something there to bring back. I wanted to get it over with. I didn't want to spend a night thinking about it.

The Clausen General Store had a *Closed for Lunch* sign in the window as I drove slowly past. There was a battered old stake-back truck parked in front of it and down the road a piece a mid-sixties Dodge sedan. The mountains are full of old machines and old people. And old dogs—two of them

working their way along the gutter, sniffing at a thin line of decaying snow. There was no other living thing in sight.

I had the map open alongside me on the seat. It was easy to follow. A gravel road teed into Main Street at the edge of town and I turned onto it going north a mile or so and then bending west. I passed two or three houses that seemed to be occupied and nine or ten that obviously weren't. Traces of snow mottled the road, but the bed was good.

The latest thaw had been on about a week now, but I faulted myself for not bringing rubber boots. It had been 75° yesterday afternoon in San Francisco, and dry. You can't think of everything, especially when you've got Tina Marie Brasselle on your mind, which I had. There was something wrong with the picture she'd framed me in and I couldn't find it.

What was left of the Braselles' old house—a fieldstone foundation and chimney stack—was on the north side of the road, uphill about 200 feet. The rest had been cannibalized or had rotted away through the years. Behind the house was a series of low terraces that had once been a garden and behind that, well up the grade of the hill, the apple trees indicated on the map, their unpruned

leafless branches like tangles of black wire.

Brush oak, thick field grasses and an advance guard of sapling pines were repossessing the abandoned, once-cleared land. It did not look as though anyone had set foot on the place since Andy had buried his loot there, but you never know in the mountains.

I've met people in the damndest places in the old Mother Lode country. It works like a magnet on certain wandering souls, not all of whom wish you well. I turned the Dart around and aimed it back towards town before parking and getting out.

By the time I'd climbed into the apples, my feet were wet and cold, but excitement had begun to bubble through my veins and I didn't much care. Down through the years I'd spent a lot of recreation time panning for gold through these hills and I'd once found a nugget the size of my knuckle, but I'd never been on the spoor of a quarter million bucks before and the breath was high in my throat. It's in us all.

It was ridiculously easy. The map said the money was buried under the eighth tree from the left in the second row, and there it was. Andy, in his haste—or maybe in a touch of tender loving care—had gathered stones over the site,

high as a cairn for a pet dog, and anyone coming that way would have known something was buried there. Anyone with a pick and shovel could have dug it up as easily as I did.

It took me ten minutes to get to the money after I got the heavy, bulky package to the surface. The bills were in perfect condition. They were bundled in brick-like blocks, wrapped and taped in plastic, packed tightly in a heavy metal tool-box that had been padlocked, its overlapping lip sealed thickly with plastic tape, the box itself wrapped in five heavy green plastic garbage bags.

It was overkill. Two of the garbage bags would have been enough, but Andy was making sure. He'd never done it before. I broke the padlock with the point of my pick and when I got inside I unwrapped only two of the 25 or so bricks to make sure the money was in good shape.

Then I filled the hole with debris and textured the surface to look reasonably natural—why, I don't know. Then I took the tool-box and gladstone bag and pick and shovel down the hill, slipping and sliding, to the footing of Tina's old house and sat there in the sun to get myself together and warm my feet.

"Calm yourself," my mother

used to say when I got overly excited, and I would. Today, we call it biofeedback or TM, but it's the same thing. You tell your heart to slow down and your blood to cool itself and it does if you really want it to. But it had never been so hard.

I sat there for a long time and listened to the quiet of the mountains, the eerie stillness. It's one of the reasons I'm so drawn to them. Sometimes, like then, all you can hear is a distant amorphous hum, like the turning of the earth itself, the sound of time passing—and the soul is soothed and the ego cut to rags.

I understood something then—in that moment of clarity—that 19 years on the Force hadn't quite taught me—that when you steal something, more than if you made it or bought it, it becomes yours because you laid your life on the line for it.

The money wasn't mine, even though I held it in my hand, and it wasn't Tina's either. It was Andy's, because he'd died for it. It could belong to no one else, and now it could not even belong to him.

I was back in my apartment on Van Ness Avenue a little before three o'clock, and all the way down I'd wondered why Tina hadn't waited until her leg was healed and then gotten

the money herself. It came into focus then—what had troubled me all day. Three months from now, she could have flown in quietly and flown out a day later with the money and parked it in some numbered Swiss account with all the other dirty loot in the world.

I decided there could be only one reason why she hadn't—because she wanted me to make the hard moral decision to keep it or turn it back where it belonged. Some broad! She still knew right from wrong, after all, but hoped that I didn't.

And it was tough. The clarity and purity of my mountain thoughts had been sullied by the return to the harsh realities of town. My hands sweated with greed, and the tongue was dry in my mouth. It was a dizzying sight, all those heavy blocks of money, all that long green, a tough lifetime of labor lying there in one tidy bunch.

All the while I was unwrapping the money and transferring it from the tool box to the gladstone bag, all the while I was wiping the bag clean of my prints, all the while I was walking down Van Ness with the bag in my hand and turning up Geary to the Wolverine Hotel and down the alley to the service entrance behind it, I wanted to stop and phone Tina and tell her to meet me at the

airport and we'd go to one of her distant lovely places. But I didn't.

Mike Raitt was at the desk in the boiler room of the Wolverine. He was the day-side superintendent of the hotel and had been for 25 years. He was also a top source of information I'd had when on the Force. I hadn't seen him since then, but he had no trouble recognizing me. He looked up from the desk with a grin.

"I can do almost anything you want," he said, "except register you for a room. Or are you selling ties now, Sam?"

"The bag is full of gold bricks, not ties, Mike, and what I want you to do is simpler than that." I put a 20 dollar bill on his desk and watched it disappear.

"What?"

I told him and he said what again and I told him again and the grin came on full. He remembered. He'd done it for me once before about 10 years ago. "When?" he said.

"About twenty minutes from now, Mike. No later."

I walked past his desk to the lobby door and down the corridor to the line of phone booths. I was moving fast because I didn't want to entertain any second thoughts about my jerry-built plan. I took the end booth and looked up the

number I wanted and dialed it and then put a ball-point pen in my mouth and held it the way a pirate would a knife.

After a three-minute hassle with secretaries, I got the vice-president of the Bayshore National Trust and Savings Bank on the line, Warren Peters, a man I knew. I told him I had the Brasselle theft money, and when he was convinced, I told him what I wanted him to do about it. He began to hem and haw and I cut him short.

"I'll tell you one more time, and that's all," I muttered darkly. "So listen good. Make out a cashier's check for fifty thousand dollars, payable to bearer. Accompany it with a letter stating the bank will honor it no matter who cashes it or when or where.

"I want the bank to promise absolutely no punitive action against anyone, no publicity, no news release, no nothing, and I want your signature on it, notarized. Then I want you personally to bring the check and letter to the men's room off the lobby in the Wolverine Hotel and—"

"What?"

"You heard me. Occupy the second toilet cubicle from the end. It'll cost you a dime, so bring one. It'll take you fifteen minutes to write the check and letter if you work fast. It'll take

you another ten to get to the Wolverine john on foot. Come alone, bring no cops or bank dicks. What color shoes are you wearing?"

"What? Brown."

"What color pants?"

"Tan."

"Fine. When you get there, sit down and wait. Somebody will tell you what to do. If you're not there in twenty-five minutes, *alone*, it'll cost your bank two hundred grand and I'll write a letter to the Board of Directors telling them it was your fault. Twenty-five minutes, starting now." I hung up. Sweat was on my brow and my teeth were clamped so tight on the pen it was shaped like a new moon.

It hadn't occurred to me that some costive type might be in the second cubicle from the end, reading *Gone With The Wind*, but there was. Or at least he was reading something because I could hear him turning the pages. I had been in the end booth for 20 minutes, seated, the gladstone, heavy as a steamer trunk, on my lap. It was 23 minutes since I'd hung up on Peters and I was beginning to covet the loot once again, saying, "Why not?"

Then I saw brown shoes and tan pants standing in front of the second booth and just then the guy in there made ready to

go and I released a long sigh. Peters rattled the door of the booth and the guy told him if he held his water for a minute, he'd save a dime. I saw Peters' feet shuffle nervously and I tucked mine as far back around the commode as I could get them, and pretty soon Peters and the man next door traded places.

I waited until the man had washed his hands and left and then I put the pen in my mouth again and said, "Let me see the check. Shove it under the partition. Hang on to your end."

He did and it looked all right and then he showed me the letter and it looked all right and then he said, whispering, "Show me the money." I think he was enjoying himself.

I put the gladstone on the floor and opened it and shoved it far enough for him to see the bills and I said, "Okay, let's trade," and we did and the pen fell out of my mouth and bounced into his booth.

"So *that's* it," he said cheerfully. "I thought you had iron teeth." I put my forefinger in my mouth and said, "Now get out of here. Go straight to the bank. Don't look back."

"Don't worry," he said. "It's the best deal I've made all day. Call me anytime."

Sure, I thought; and when I reached down and scrabbled for

the pen, I saw he'd taken it with him. I moved fast. The door to the lobby was just closing on his back as I dashed around the end of my cubicle and was clawing at the door marked, *Maintenance. No Admittance.* There was no handle on it, just a keyhole for a Yale lock, but Mike had left it ajar by a quarter inch and I had it open and was through and had it back on the latch before some fairly heavy body hit it on the other side and bounced off. Mike was nowhere in sight as I ran through the boiler room and out the alley door.

THERE IS NO WAY—I had decided by ten o'clock that night—you can get a usable fingerprint off a slender ballpoint pen. Not that it mattered much. You can make a deal to return recovered loot to the lootee, and the law doesn't necessarily have to be concerned—unless the lootee brings them in.

Peters was right, it was the best deal he'd made all day, but I'd known in advance he'd bring at least a bank dick with him because he'd been in charge of security when Andy pulled the job and it had hurt his pride. Now he had a pen with teeth-marks on it to study—and most of his money back.

I tried Tina's number again with the same result, nothing.

She was out with Bronson, I'd surmised hours ago, discussing my fate—a certain ambiguity on her side now, wondering how I'd done. I made another drink and stared for the 20th time at my new Dong Kingman water color over the phone table, and then dialed her number again at ten-thirty.

She answered, and it was the same old thing—mouth suddenly dry, breath high in the throat, heart slamming around. All because she'd said, "Yes—Sam?" In that voice.

"Yeah, it's me," I answered. "I'm sorry. I just got back. From Clausen." I was speaking in short bursts, the best I could do. "There's nothing there, Tina. Somebody beat me to it."

"Yes. I found the spot—no trouble. There was a hole there, fairly fresh."

"Yes. Andy probably told someone in jail. Maybe they got it out of him the hard way, I don't know. But you've got the ball now, baby, and you can pass, punt or pray with it. I don't care which." She started to say something, but I rolled over it.

"Look, I don't really want to talk to you anymore, or see you. Whatever you've got to do, just do, don't talk to me about it, don't write me about it, just do it. Goodbye Tina Marie."

I hung up and discovered I'd

been standing, and sat down. I drew my hand across the front of the terry-cloth robe I wear around the apartment and wiped it dry. I sat there for a while, wondering if she'd call back. And then I went to bed.

It'd been a good day for Peters, maybe, but a bad day for me—I'd lost a quarter million bucks and the woman I love all in one neat bundle. But then, I'd never really had either one.

All the next week I was busy on a case, but the week after that I was free, and what a week it was! Every once in a while in San Francisco there are clusters of days so clear so free of blemish, so promising that you fall in love again—with the city, if with nothing else. That week was one of them, the effect accumulating as the days progressed, and I drifted through it with my heart on my sleeve.

I could be nowhere else but here, in love with nothing else but this brilliant troubled town. I would have withered away with Tina in one of her distant lovely places, as she would have withered away here with me. She'd told me that seven years ago when I'd asked her to stay, and she'd been right on that one.

Yet I couldn't get her out of my mind. Nor Bronson. But if Bronson struck, I had \$50,000

to defend myself with—maybe to buy back his witness, if it came to that.

Then, on Saturday of that week, a thick registered envelope arrived from Geneva with Andy's letter and Bronson's letter, both in their original envelopes and I had all I'd ever need to fend him off. In fact, it was enough to destroy him if I wanted it to, and I put the letters with the cashier's check in my safe deposit box.

For the next five weeks I took a job as bodyguard to a hard-drinking executive of a big import firm on a swing he made through the far east and South America. He didn't want to get kidnapped. It was a bore.

In the mail that had accumulated in my absence was a postcard from Tina. It showed a picture of the Matterhorn in Switzerland, an army of skiers like multi-colored bugs dotting its slopes. It had been mailed in the middle of April.

On the message side, she had written, *Back at it again—carefully. Thought you'd like to know. The show goes on, Sam, all of it. Tina.*

It was another of those gorgeous days in town—it was sheer joy for me to walk down to my bank, get the check box and mail it to Tina. *She'd earned it, not me.* Besides, it couldn't hurt her now.

NEVER TRUST A SALESMAN

by
GERALD
TOMLINSON



Phil stalked his wife's obnoxious lover with lethal intent. Unfortunately, his quarry was not a victim.

I TIPPED A CAN of beer to my lips and watched Carl Yaszczewski triple home two runs on the idiot box. I had a 25-inch color console as against Dan's 19-inch portable, so he'd taken to installing himself in my Old Tarrytown living room on Saturday afternoons.

"A sales representative Phil," Dan Said. "I'm a sales rep."

"Yeah."

"Not a salesman." He made it sound important.

"No."

"Not a salesperson either. That's the latest, you know."

"You've got too much class to be a salesperson," I told him.

He nodded. Sarcasm never bothered Dan Richter. As a rule it didn't register with him. Zero on the Richter scale.

I tried that out on him once—"Zero on the Richter scale"—and he answered, puzzled, "That's like Harry Hersefield's old Laugh Meter, right? Back on *Can You Top This?* Remember?"

I couldn't top that.

"You take a guy like me," Dan went on. "A guy who sells high school textbooks." He crushed his empty Rheingold can for emphasis, depositing its twisted remains on the living room rug. "He can't be some City College dropout with a canned sales pitch."

"No?"

"No," Richter said, glowering. His sagging bulldog jowls and red-veined cheeks added a decade of dissipated maturity to his forty-two years.

"A guy like that couldn't hack it, baby. Canned pitches went out with McGuffey's Readers. A sales rep's got to be able to answer questions. Tough ones."

"Like what?"

My view of Dan's intellect was that he'd be stumped if someone asked him the number of eggs in a dozen. Maybe not, but I'm sure nobody would

nominate him for Old Tarrytown's Genius of the Year.

Of course Richter had a high opinion of himself. The salesman's ego.

"Tough questions, Phil. Scope and sequence stuff—inductive approach, spiral curriculum, linguistics, individualizing, affective education, concepts, metrics—garbage like that."

Dan leaned back in my favorite easy chair, studying my wife Irene as she leaned over to put a tray of cheese and saltines on the coffee table between us. Irene had been Miss Westchester once, not so many years ago. Today she wore a scoop-necked dress and Dan, about as subtle as a moose in rut, wasn't concentrating on her aquiline nose.

"Are you boys watching the baseball game?" Irene asked, motioning toward the TV console. "Josh"—that's our thirteen-year-old son—"wants to watch *The Monster from the Deep*."

"If that's what he wants," Dan said absently, intent on his real-life drama, "tell him to go next door. Nora"—that's Dan's wife—"she's over there in curlers and a bathrobe. She'll pass for the monster any day."

It was a cheap shot. Nora, an alumna of Miss Dupré's School and Dorinda College, was a shy brilliant woman, ten years

younger than Dan, mismatched, bored by housework and upset by Dan's constant roving. She'd been living for a year or so on a strict diet of Canadian whiskey, morning, noon and night. An unbalanced diet, but she still looked better at bedtime than Dan did at bedbreak.

I thought Dan's remark was out of line. But Irene, lovely Irene, vivacious as a cheerleader even with her sensual lips and inviting gray eyes, smiled at him as if he'd just topped Harry Hershfield in the humor department.

"Oh, Dan, you shouldn't talk that way."

He shouldn't. I agreed. I didn't like it.

There were a lot of things I didn't like.

The husband is the last to know, they say. But not this time. I'd followed the progress of Dan and Irene's affair since that April night a month back when I saw them kissing, furtively but with plenty of meaning, outside our carport.

A memorable scene, an American classic. It took place, appropriately enough, at the end of an April Fools' party. They both had had too much to drink and, in their eagerness to nuzzle, they abandoned what I suppose was their usual caution. I watched from the kitchen window with a curious

feeling of apathy. The fury came later.

They didn't see me.

As personnel manager of Bolton Plastics, White Plains, my hours of work were fixed. Eight o'clock in the morning to four in the afternoon. Since a personnel manager has to set an example for everybody else, my freedom of movement was more restricted than my vice-presidential title might suggest.

Dan's schedule was flexible. "No clerk's hours for me," he'd crow when I complained to him over beer or martinis about the morning tardiness of Bolton's blue-collar and clerical workers. "Plastics men, every one of 'em!" He amused himself over and over with that same tired line.

Dan, unlike me, had plenty of free time to spend with Irene if he wanted to. After that April night, after that breathless embrace, I was pretty sure he wanted to.

I had to find out for sure. My obvious move was to chart Irene's daytime course. But how?"

It turned out to be easy, thanks to modern electronics. Using Josh's library card, I took out a well-thumbed book called *The Eavesdroppers* from the White Plains Public Library. The author, one Roscoe Todd, made a caustic case

against the ever-increasing electronic invasions of privacy. Words like "outrageous," "insidious" and "deceitful" snapped angrily from his typewriter.

But Todd also provided a wealth of information on how to do it. There were clear instructions, down-to-earth advice, all jumbled up with the anti-bugging invective. Near the end of Chapter 11 he wrote, 'Clip an ad from a second-rate men's adventure magazine, mail it in and you will receive information on a correspondence course in bugging and wiretapping, on wiretapping devices, different kinds of wireless mikes and a newsletter on the latest fashions in bugging, home-delivered.'

Thank you, Roscoe Todd.

I picked up half a dozen men's magazines, the kind in which a cut-rate Playmate poses for black-and-white photos, muddily reproduced, and a hack writer in a Manhattan walk-up tells you how to make your first million prospecting up the Zambezi for diamonds.

Within a week I had two of our three home telephones delivering their two-way messages to magnetic tape.

I also learned how to hook up a hidden recorder in Irene's Chevy so that it would begin recording when the seat belt on

the passenger's side was fastened. Since Irene always insists that her passengers fasten their seat belts, I figured that by hooking the recorder to the passenger's side, I'd be using tape only when there was likely to be a conversation.

The phone bugs didn't earn their keep. I got a Mylar mile of talk between Josh and his mumbling friends—"like, y'know, I mean, heavy, man"—and although I learned a few things about Old Tarrytown's teen-agers, I didn't learn a thing about Dan and Irene.

Then there was Irene holding forth on the blue Princess in her bedroom. Born to the telephone, the *grand dame* of gossip, Irene the Interminable. When she picked up the receiver, even a fresh M-90 tape was no guarantee that the whole conversation would get recorded. No matter. The talk was as innocent as an infant's and about as informative. I spent hours listening to domestic trivia so dull that I began to think of Irene and her friends as suburban zombies, incompleting corpses.

When listening to the tapes at night, I used a set of earphones, which gave the whole procedure an ironic touch. I could lie in our big double bed, earphones clamped in place,

and listen to Irene's endless daytime chatter. At the same time, she was sitting beside me, crocheting something for a neighbor or some other local charity, with one eye on a line-up of TV shows that America's critics, including me, considered the worst array to date.

"What are you listening to, Phil?" Irene asked me on the fourth night, her mouth drawn tight. She had finally noticed my new routine.

"Nothing," I said. "Just a cassette course on how a guy's home life can screw up his job efficiency."

That seemed just about to sum it up.

"Oh!"

The conversation ended there. Irene's eyes dropped to her crocheting. When my eyes later dropped to her negligée, she yawned, laid aside the needle and yarn, complained of a slight headache and a sore back, and went to sleep.

Her recorded voice babbled on. "Francine, what does Joe do about leaking faucets? Fixes them himself? Um. It's easy, isn't it? I mean, Joe could probably teach Phil how to—"

I pressed the Stop button, rewound the tape, switched off the recorder, set it up again for tomorrow's trivia, swallowed three quick shots of cognac, lay

down, dozed off and dreamed of myself in overalls, fixing a dripping kitchen faucet, sweating from my forehead while Irene in the rec room cool as a Las Vegas showgirl entertained Dan Richter on a waterbed.

Maybe it was premonition. I don't know. Whatever it was, the recorder in Irene's Chevy turned out to have a tale to tell.

After nodding through a couple of discussions of tennis strategy between Irene and her friend Alice Stabler—a hard-eyed divorcée who made no secret of her belief that nice films finish last—I caught sighs of diamonds on the Zambezi Verbal ones and not very sparkling.

It was Wednesday of the fourth week. After dinner I slipped the cassette out of the recorder in Irene's car. About half the tape had been run.

I played it that night.

I won't quote what was on it but it told me what I had suspected. Amour! Irene and Dan lovers and connoisseurs of love were guilty of the Big A. Guilty as hell.

In repressed rage, I looked out of our bedroom window, at Thermopane through which the sun had once shone brightly. No more. Tonight I saw a full May moon, a brazenly twin

ling Venus and blood on the tars.

The tape rolled on. Irene was talking to Dan in ways and words she'd never used with me. Love was the topic of conversation, and *Penthouse Forum* was its basic mode.

My face must have turned alternately plum-red and parchment-white as I listened. Usually I can control my inner feelings, but not this time. I felt like a married virgin. It was just as well Irene was distracted by the Channel Four movie, *Counterfeit Wife*, an aptly named picture if ever there was one.

I've always had a streak of vindictiveness. "Meanness," Irene called it. "Calm on the outside but with a temper fit to kill."

"...to kill." There was no doubt in my mind about the need for revenge. The taped conversation swept away any qualms I had about my course of action. I wanted revenge. I wanted a payoff in blood, nothing less. The only questions were the usual three—when? where? how?

Even though I was now close to despising Irene rather than just disliking her, it was Dan Richter I marked for death. Dan would be the target—bluff, hearty Dan. Dan, whom Irene had immortalized on tape as

her "handsome stallion," would pay the mortal price for his romps. A stallion? He would die like a dog.

But what about those three questions?

The answer came from Dan himself.

He settled in with us the next Saturday afternoon, a sparkling cool May Day, for a Yankee-White Sox game. His belly sagging over the top of his plaid slacks, a beer can in one hand and a fistful of dry-roasted peanuts in the other, he didn't look like the Don Juan of Old Tarrytown. Not to me he didn't, but obviously I was no judge.

"Just got a big order in from Horatio Seymour High," he boomed, aiming his voice toward the kitchen.

"You don't say," I said.

"You heard me, baby."

Irene looked out from the kitchen, a worried expression on her face. "Isn't that the school where they had the riots? Where the police kept getting hit with chairs and chalk and textbooks?"

"That's right, precious." He'd been calling her "precious" for ten years. Like the patronizing "baby" for me, it never had meant a thing. "Seymour High, the switchblade institute—just off Colchester Road in the South Bronx."

Irene came into the living room, wiping her hands on a dish towel. Even carrying a dish towel and wearing a print apron she looked stunning. So lush, so deadly.

"You shouldn't go there, Dan," she said. "It's the most dangerous part of the city. That's what they called it on TV. You could get mugged."

He shrugged.

"Or killed." Her usually calm voice showed more than a hint of anxiety.

I concentrated on a bases-loaded one-out situation in the top of the first inning. Doc Medich in trouble already—too chilly for him out there—the makings of a ruined afternoon before it began. *Bear down, Doc . . . try the slider. . .* The plight of the Yankees, I confess, bothered me more than the plight of Dan Richter.

"Oh, it's dangerous," he said expansively. "Seymour High is in a bad part of town. But what the hell. I go to Seymour and the competition doesn't. Ever since poor Bill Swayze, the Davidson-Bradley rep, came out to find his car up on blocks, I'm the only guy that calls there."

He downed his beer with gusto and great courage.

I lowered mine slowly to the coffee table. "Irene's right, Dan. The South Bronx is pretty dangerous these days. You're

not really going there, are you? Not before next fall?"

Dan's eyes were on Irene as he answered. He winked. "You better believe I'm going, Phil. I got a monopoly there. I can't sell books and then run away. I got servicing to do."

I wagged my head in mock concern. "Good luck. I wouldn't want to go there at high noon on Easter Sunday."

"Well, I'm going there at high noon next Wednesday One p.m., to be exact." He crushed his beer can like Rommel crushing Tobruk.

Thank you, Dan Richter.

"I've got appointments with half a dozen teachers," he went on. "The city's broke, but Seymour High's got money. Crazy, but typical. I'll be carrying a bundle out of there this year."

I took a sip of beer. "Just make sure they don't carry you out, Dan. Feet first, slammed on the head and framed in blood."

The lard above his belt shook with laughter. "Don't you worry, baby. They won't."

I never knew whether Dan Richter was a good salesman or not. He thought he was. His own view of himself was as inflated as his stomach. He claimed to have half the teachers of the Bronx and Queens in his hip pocket.

"Ten years of service, a ton of influence," he said. Could be. All I knew was he didn't have an ounce of sense.

The next day, a rainy Sunday, I reconnoitered. While Irene and Josh were in Valhalla at the church of their choice, I drove from the spring greenery of Westchester to the ashen gray reaches of the South Bronx—from open parkways to littered city streets. I spent half an hour, all of it in my car, exploring the vicinity of Seymour High School.

The school was well situated for my purposes. It stood in an urban renewal area, where the condemnation was practically total and the rebuilding hadn't begun. There were good sites for a daytime mugging everywhere—deserted store entrances, empty streets under empty tenements, dead-end alleys with brick walls rising on three sides like abandoned dungeons.

I left the South Bronx, satisfied. It should be easy to intercept Dan Richter between his car and the school, force him at gunpoint into an alleyway or a store entrance and there put a stop to his philandering forever. My chosen weapon—a hunting knife I had owned since childhood but had so far never used.

I had decided on the method. Now all I needed was the time.

I soon settled on a way to get it.

As personnel manager at Bolton Plastics, I sometimes had to conduct long private interviews with employees. My office had two doors, both of which could be locked. One door opened on a small room, a kind of foyer, with two secretaries—a redhead for me, a brunette for our corporate counsel. The other door opened on a hallway and was conveniently located within twenty-five feet of the exit doors on the west side of the building.

If I parked my car near the west exit, I could leave the building during working hours with no more than a five percent chance of being seen. Even if someone did see me, it shouldn't matter. My alibi from one o'clock to three should hold.

The Bolton lunch hour, fairly well-observed even by white-collar workers, was from twelve to one. At ten minutes before noon on Wednesday, I ran for my secretary, Jill Dresser.

"Jill," I said, "when you get back from lunch, I'll be talking with one of our employees. Privately, behind closed doors. I can't tell you the man's name. But he's an executive near the top and the problem is serious. I don't know how long it'll take, but I'd guess the session might last until three o'clock. During

the time I don't want to be disturbed."

"Very well." She hesitated. "But what if the president—"

"He won't. He's in Cleveland today. And even if he calls in, put him off. Tell him I'll ring him back as soon as I can. He'll understand."

"All right, Mr. Haynes." She looked doubtful.

When she went out, I locked the foyer door behind her, then slipped out immediately by the hallway door, locking it as well.

No one saw me go. The hallway was deserted, the parking lot was clear. I slid behind the wheel of my white Montego and aimed east toward the Hutchinson River Parkway.

Forty minutes later I was dodging potholes on Colchester Road, a few blocks from Horatio Seymour High School. Parking on a side street in front of a condemned and empty tenement, I snapped open the glove compartment and pulled out a loaded black-handled Beretta in a worn leather holster, a World War Two souvenir that my father had brought back from Italy. He'd test-fired it once twenty years ago, then given it to me. I'd never fired it, but I knew how.

I slipped the Beretta into the side pocket of my sport jacket. The jacket sagged under the weight, but I wasn't concerned.

The south Bronx isn't a corporate board room. I doubted that anyone would notice. If they did, they'd be more likely to figure a bottle of muscatel than a Beretta.

Then I took the murder weapon from my glove compartment. I undid my belt, attached the sheath of the hunting knife to it, rebuckled the belt. I opened the snap at the top of the sheath and removed the weapon, a heavy bone-handled piece with a broad six-inch blade. It should do the job. I replaced the knife, buttoned my sports jacket, pushed the glove compartment shut and focused my attention on the street.

Horatio Seymour High School loomed ahead of me, a nineteenth-century brick fortress that seemed designed to turn eager scholars into sullen inmates. Its grimy windows stared down on the scene of urban desolation I had canvassed Sunday. No doubt school offered the usual Latinate diplomas, but it looked more like a place for passing out tickets to death.

There had been riots here. No wonder.

I pulled out of my parking space and began to cruise the streets, looking for Dan Richter's car, a dark blue Cutlass. I didn't find it. Street after

street, north and south, east and west, block after block, back and forth, past all the possible places he could park. There were no garages. He had to park on the street.

I had arrived early at Seymour High. But time passed. Street by street, block by block, time passed, and now it was getting late. My watch read 1:45 as I cruised past the high school for the fifth or sixth time.

I couldn't keep driving around this way. My white Montego was too conspicuous for prowling all afternoon in one small, mostly deserted area of the city.

Parking on the same side street as before, this time in front of an open lot behind the stripped carcass of a Buick, I locked my car and walked up the empty street toward the school, still keeping an eye out for Dan Richter's company Cutlass. No luck. A cheerful sun shone down, bathing the ruins of the surrounding Bronx in a warm and alien glow.

Across the street from Seymour High's main entrance, I stopped at a pool hall sandwiched between a closed meat market and a fire-gutted bakery. Opening the door, I glanced in. A listless game was in progress. No one looked up at me.

I couldn't go into the high school, I didn't want to. But I couldn't loiter on the street either.

It occurred to me, in one of my sudden flashes of insight, that this whole plan smacked of the idiotic. The idea of killing Dan Richter between his car and the school, of stabbing him in this den of muggers, and then of robbing him so as to leave no doubt about the motive—it had all seemed sensible enough back in the bedroom in Old Tarrytown. It had seemed okay Sunday in the privacy of my car. But it didn't seem so smart right here, on the street, now.

I spotted a candy store three doors down from the pool hall. It wasn't the perfect hideaway, but I had to get off the street. A uniformed policeman stood on the front steps of Seymour High School and, even though he looked asleep on his feet, I couldn't be sure.

"Coffee," I said, settling myself on one of six stools covered with cracked red vinyl.

An enormous albino woman with pink eyes, ruby earrings and matching skin splotches raised her vast arms to the counter. She dumped a teaspoon of instant coffee into a chipped cup, added boiling water, balanced a thimbleful of milk-flavored chemicals on the

saucer and shoved the outcome in my direction.

"Fifteen cents," she said in a belligerent whine, as if she thought I might try to bargain her down to ten.

You can't really nurse a cup of coffee, but I tried, concentrating all the while on my own reflection in a dirty mirror behind the counter.

Where the hell was Dan Richter? Two o'clock came and went. Across the street at Seymour High, nothing came or went. Nobody moved. The policeman guarding the door wasn't dozing, but he looked as bored as Fatty Arbuckle at a Sunday School picnic.

By ten minutes past two, my white-elephant hostess was beginning to get fidgety. Dan Richter still hadn't made his appearance, but I couldn't sip coffee any longer. I was getting as conspicuous as the Montego. I donated a five-cent tip to the Albino Waitress Fund and left.

Where could I go? I had counted on being on the way back to my office by now.

This was dangerous territory down here. I was the area Irene and I had warned Dan against going to. Ironical. I'd warned him against it, I'd warned him in a deadly vein, but here I was, myself, alone on the crumbling concrete, with no place to go, no place to hide.

And where was Dan Richter?

I headed back toward the pool hall, back in the direction of my car.

Across the street, fifty yards ahead of me, stood the last sign of life in a condemned six-story building—a small tavern with a black facade and silver filigree letters spelling out the name *Biscayne Bay Bar*. The strange naming customs of the natives, I thought. Why not *Bronx Kill Saloon* after a nearby tributary of the Harlem River? Or *Randall's Island Tavern* after a landmark to the south?

The door of the *Biscayne Bay Bar* swung open and a black man who would have given pause to Mean Joe Green stumbled out. He managed the curb without difficulty and angled straight toward me.

I tapped the cold blue steel in my jacket pocket. At least I was armed—dangerous if I had to be.

The Man Mountain clearly had me in mind. He stepped into my path, swaying, a fixed scowl on his face. His black hair had many specks of white, he was no kid anymore, but he still looked powerful enough to pulverize me if the notion struck him.

I halted.

"You the dude driving that white Montego?" His deep voice sounded casual but there can be

menace in any tone. I heard it in his.

"Yeah."

"Pretty expensive car, man."

"About average."

"You're a stranger in town. Westchester plates, right?"

"Yeah."

"You slumming?"

"No."

"A dude with a fancy car like that—and from Westchester, man—you just got to have money."

I glanced around. We were alone on the street.

"Not very much with me," I said.

"Every little bit helps."

He started to advance toward me in what looked like a wrestler's stance, unhurried, stalking.

I took a slow step backward and pulled the Beretta from my pocket.

The Man Mountain didn't hesitate. He saw the gun coming, bellowed in rage, dived at my knees. He must have played football in his younger days. It was a clean tackle. I felt my legs fly out from under me. My body jackknifed forward, my arms chopped downward, the gun went off in the wrong direction, pain streaked through the lower part of my body, and I fell heavily across the black man's back, my head following my arms in a descending arc.



The sidewalk rose up to meet me. I saw it coming, helpless. My head slammed into concrete. Pinpoints of light, then utter blackness canceled all images of the South Bronx.

It might have been minutes. It might have been days. I didn't know, but at some point the anesthetic smell of a hospital penetrated my nostrils and my consciousness.

I HEARD THE BUZZ of concerned voices and, opening my eyes, saw Irene in an off-the-shoulder blouse and a short skirt standing beside Dan Richter. He was tall and commanding, heavy but athletic, wearing a light blue outer shirt and flared slacks of the same color. He seemed to be trying to console her.

My first thought was to close my eyes, turn over in bed, and pretend unconsciousness. Too late. Dan caught sight of my opened eyes.

"Phil, baby," he boomed. "You had us worried."

I tried to look composed, impassive. But at the same moment I tried to move my legs. The composure vanished. Nothing happened below my waist. Something was wrong. Badly wrong. My legs wouldn't move. There was no feeling in them.

Irene leaned over and pecked me on the forehead.

"My legs—" I gasped at her.

"Try to rest," she said.

"I'm paralyzed!"

"The doctors are doing their best, Phil. They say there's some hope. The bullet hit your spinal column."

Dan moved in with all the finesse of a bulldozer. "You'll be okay, Phil. Keep a stiff upper lip. Surgeons can work wonders these days. You'll be back on your feet in no time. Hell, I'll bet you'll be walking again in three or four months. And, look, we've got you a good attorney—Sam Berkowitz, the best criminal lawyer in Westchester."

"Lawyer? Berkowitz?"

"Oh, just a couple of illegal gun possession charges. No sweat. Sullivan Law stuff. Pretty stiff penalties on the books, but this is your first offense, so there's not much to worry about."

"What about the big black guy?"

"Who?"

"The big black guy. The one who stopped me."

Irene looked puzzled. "You were alone when they found you, Phil. You'd tripped on the broken sidewalk, and the gun went off. That's what the police told us. Isn't that what happened?"

I closed my eyes.

"Don't worry about it," Dan

rumbled in his best bedside manner. "We all do silly things now and then. Even me. But tell me, for God sakes, why did you go down to the South Bronx this afternoon? That's Pork Chop Hill down there."

"You go down there," I said quietly, without opening my eyes.

"Hey, baby," he said, chuckling. "Never trust a salesman. You ought to know that by now. Look, I brag a lot. I try to make myself look good. But I don't call on Seymour High School any more. Not after Swayze's car ended up on blocks. I'm not *that* crazy."

There was a long pause. Then Irene said softly, "Dan was at Scarsdale High today. Near home." She drew in her breath as if her lungs hurt her as much as her conscience ought to, but probably didn't. "You wouldn't have shot him, would you, Phil?"

My eyes stayed shut.

"You knew about Dan and me, didn't you?" She asked it flatly, without emotion.

Staring into the black void, I said nothing.

"Hey, look," Dan said, embarrassed either by the silence or by the twist of circumstances. "No hard feelings, baby. I know how you must have felt. The same way I felt when I found out my old buddy Jack Hendricks had spent one night with Nora. But what's done is done. The thing we've got to do now is get you up and moving—get you healthy and walking again. And keep you the hell out of jail."

"Thanks a lot," I said through clenched teeth, my eyes still shut. "Thanks for everything."

"Hey, we're on your side, Phil. Don't get us wrong. I mean, what good is life without friends? We're here, we're with you. We'll see this thing through together, just like old times. Won't we, precious?"

Irene didn't say a thing.

I opened my eyes just in time to see Dan bend toward her upturned face and kiss her lightly on the cheek.



THE ONLY MAGAZINE featuring MIKE SHAYNE every issue!

TO MAMA WITH LOVE

by SARAH RANDALL



“A DIFFERENT STORY”

A persistent source of complaint on the part of the readers of MSMM is the infrequency with which the magazine runs "different" stories. Justification? Certainly. TO MAMA WITH LOVE is the first such story we have run since the July, 1976, issue when the memorable DO NOT FOLD, SPINDLE OR MUTILATE appeared. Six months or more between "different" stories? Yes, there is a reason for the long hiatus. Offbeat crime-fiction stories good enough to publish in MIKE SHAYNE simply don't come along very often. Sometimes it seems as if they are written by accident, since so few authors seem able to repeat—perhaps because, in the mystery field, they must retain credibility while straining at the leash of fantasy or science fiction. But here, at last is another—and it's a good one. So have a ball.

MARY SELBY WAS DEAD, God rest her.

"She'd lived long past her time. Senile, you know," Lester Crane's wife told the manager of the super-market, nodding her reluctant approval of Mary's demise.

"They say she didn't know a thing these past few years, poor woman," Mrs. Lee from the dry cleaners on 6th Street volunteered, standing behind Mrs. Crane at the checkout stand,

her arms loaded with a roasting chicken and a sack of potatoes.

"If you ask me, it was a blessing," Nettie Barker butted in, passing in back of them on her way into the store, though no one had asked her. She decided to stop just long enough to add, "Especially for Eddy. She was an awful burden to him and Aggie. She'd got so she wandered around the place like a lost child. They couldn't trust her out of their sight.

"Aggie said she came near to falling down the stairs and breaking her neck more than once. She didn't have no one else, though, so what could Eddy do? He couldn't very well put her in a nursing home, what with it being her land and her money and all the rest of the estate."

"Well," Lester Crane's wife hurriedly put in, frantic to say her piece before someone else had a chance, "Lester and I heard he couldn't have put her anywhere, anyway. We heard Mary and Ervy fixed their wills so Eddy'd have to take care of them until they were both gone."

"You know, their lawyer, himself, told Lester confidentially that they'd fixed it, too, so Eddy would only get a salary for running the place until the time came for him to inherit it. Guess Ervy, seeing how shiftless Eddy was as a boy, liking a good time better than he did the feel of dirt, figured Eddy'd better earn this way for a while, instead of getting it all handed to him on a silver platter right off."

"And I know for a fact that Mary arranged for nearly every red cent of profit to go into savings. She told my aunt once that she wanted it there for Eddy to have later on, when he'd appreciate it. Of course,"

she added quickly, "Eddy was a good son to them."

Heads nodded in agreement.

"How's Eddy taking it?" asked Nettie.

"Well, Eddy's awful quiet, you know. Keeps things to himself, don't spread his business around much," Mrs. Lee said knowingly.

One said; "Poor Eddy. He's a rich man now but what a way to come by it. Havin' to lose his mama to get the land." They all shook their heads and clucked in unison at this. A few muttered "poor Eddy" and then went on with their shopping, putting Mary Selby and her son away for another conversation another time.

Eddy Selby was alive. And Eddy Selby was a worried man, though few people would have known it.

He parked his truck across from Abe Wilson's funeral parlor and, sitting there a minute before he got out and walked over, he tried to collect his thoughts, unjumble the list of do's and don'ts he was carrying in his head. He didn't really want to think too heavily about the next few days. He wasn't exactly looking forward to them.

He watched as Bill Davis' sheriff's car pulled in and stopped in the courthouse parking lot further down the street.

seeing it jarred the pile of problems he was examining and a eighty piece fell out and landed with a thud inside his skull.

"Damn," he said aloud. "I hope old Bill keeps his mouth shut."

He and Bill were friends, had been since they were boys rowing up together when this town was still so small it had a one-room school house. He had recently reminded Bill of that last night. It was plain to anyone who had two good eyes that his mother had fell out of the jammed window, teetering over the edge of it like an old fool.

Everybody knew that they'd had to watch her like hawks, that she didn't know where she was or what she was doing half the time. Bill knew, too. But Bill had been so upset that he turned white around the mouth when he saw the old woman's head all battered and bloody from the fall, and the broken ankle, twisted over at an angle and black as sin by the time they found her.

It just didn't look too good, Bill said. But Eddy explained to him how no one could fall out of

high window and not get pretty badly messed up and, if he'd tumbled head over heels, there was no telling what she'd do on the way down. Old bones were pretty easy to break.

Bill hadn't had too much more to say after Doc Bryant got there and said it was an obvious accident, that he was surprised it hadn't happened sooner, "Mary being like she was."

Bill had just been passing by on his regular patrol on the country road when he'd seen the lights on in the back yard and had stopped to ask what the trouble was. Mary had been laid out on the ground, as if by careful hands, at the base of the gnarled old maple tree that grew up alongside the back porch.

The window of her second story bedroom had been wide open and you could see where the shingles had been broken loose on the porch roof where she'd slid across it on her way to the hard ground below. Mary Selby had been a second mother to him and, as he said to Eddy just after the ambulance had taken the body away, he guessed he'd just been shocked to see her like that, a frail little old woman all bruised up like she'd been on the losing end of a barroom brawl.

He'd been quick, then, to let Eddy know he hadn't thought he'd touched his own mother or done anything to hurt her. It was just that he, Bill, had been so shocked by it all.

It was then that Eddy had

talked about the old days and the good times they used to have together. Then he'd said, "Bill, if you're shocked, everybody else will be, too. You know how folks are about other people's business." And he asked him to keep it as quiet as he could. He also asked him to talk to Pete Warden, the editor of the weekly newspaper, a mutual friend, and ask him as a personal favor to keep it out of the paper. Out of loyalty to Eddy, Bill agreed to do what he could.

Now Eddy was steeling himself to walk over and talk to Abe and arrange a closed casket funeral and the cremation his mother had mentioned once she'd like to have when her time came. He'd have to explain to Abe about how his mother, being a proud woman, wouldn't want her kin and her friends to see her all messed up like she was.

At least he didn't have to worry about them cutting her up and mutilating her with an autopsy. He'd worried that maybe Doc Bryant would want to do one but Doc had said he didn't think it would be necessary, since he knew the cause of death.

"If you didn't kill her, Eddy, there's no need to do one, is there?" Doc had asked, his eyes twinkling behind his thick,

old-fashioned glasses. Eddy didn't really think Doc was half as funny as Doc did sometimes.

Putting thoughts of Bill and Doc aside, he went on to the funeral parlor, anxious to get over with.

He and Abe, a small man whose head was as devoid of hair as a rock, except for bushy moss-like gray and black eyebrows that grew in an almost uninterrupted line above round slate colored eyes, talked over the arrangements. Abe, usually customarily caught off guard, raised those queer eyebrows moving his whole scalp back a good inch in the process.

He looked a little surprised at the request for the close casket service and its accompanying explanation. He seldom had a closed casket service because the folks in this community wanted to see their loved ones until the very end. He was a good cosmetician and could make people look pretty darned good for their last good byes.

But, good businessman that he was, he rearranged his face in its usual serious expression, held his tongue and didn't bat an eye when Eddy picked out the cheapest wooden casket available. It was the one usually reserved for county burial.

"Will that be cash, Eddy?" Abe asked, back in the heaven

carpeted, hushed office.

"Better let me get this later, Abe. I'm kind of short on ready cash right now," Eddy said, embarrassment turning his face and neck a bright red.

Again, Abe didn't react one way or the other and Eddy wondered darkly what Abe was thinking about behind that sickening mortician's face. He signed an agreement to accept responsibility for the funeral costs and got out of there quickly. He felt like he'd just been accused of something, though no words had been said, and it wasn't a good feeling.

On his way back out to the farm, he stopped at the liquor store on the edge of town and bought a fifth of Old Granddad, digging deep into his battered black wallet to come up with the money. He figured he was entitled to a little luxury once in a while.

"A little medicine for the soul, like my old daddy used to say," he joked with the clerk. Then he drove home, planning not to think of his parents or anything else, if he could help it, until the bottles were drained and the immediate worries were past.

Driving down the dirt lane to the house, Eddy felt a heavy loneliness clutching at him and depression began to set in. He had been so busy with other



things he hadn't had time to feel down any sooner. He was glad he'd bought the bourbon.

THE OLD HOUSE had been built just before World War I by Mary Selby's father. It had been a wedding gift to her and her young husband, along with 640 acres of wheat land surrounding it. The rest of the land had come to her and Eddy when the old folks passed away.

It was the richest soil in the county.

The house, itself, had obviously been built by the father of an only child, a girl, in anticipation of many grandsons. It was a large two-story structure with nine rooms. Long porches ran across both front and back and it was blessed with tall trees for boys to stretch their minds and limbs in.

Set back away from the road and miles from any neighbors, there was space to yell and squabble and play, room to be as rambunctious as anyone would ever want to be.

Eddy had ended up being the only boy ever to live there, a disappointment to his grandfather but one he had finally accepted. He had loved Eddy intensely and spoiled him just as intensely. And Eddy loved the house as much as he'd ever loved anything.

Now, though, there was something discomfitting about the old place. With no little reluctance, he gathered up the bourbon and the papers Abe had given him and went in the back door to the big old-fashioned kitchen. He took a glass from the cupboard and sat down, bottle in front of him, at the kitchen table.

Looking around at the tall, narrow cupboards, then up at the high ceiling, then glancing

through the archway to the rooms beyond, he thought, *I'm going to remodel this place now that Ma isn't here to stop me, the stingy old bitch. There's no point in its looking like a damned old museum when I'm going to have all the money I need to fix it up.*

Then he had a vision of his mother puttering around as she used to when his dad was still alive and he felt the first tear he's shed in many years slide down through the rough stubble on his cheek.

Damn her! he thought. *Why'd she have to go and do it?* Angrily he pounded his fist down on the table. The sound echoes back from the shadows of the empty rooms.

He and Aggie had spent the night before cleaning the upstairs room. Whey they finished, Aggie had said she had to get out of there for a couple of days and pull herself together. Exhausted, they'd collapsed into bed and slept until it had been time to go into town, get Aggie on the bus to her brother's in Spokane and make the funeral arrangements.

There hadn't been time to check the room over again. Now, glass in hand, he made his way up the stairs at the back of the house. He wanted to forget all of it but he guessed

he'd better look everything over, just in case someone came nosing around.

He opened the door. Some of the smell still lingered but otherwise it seemed all right to him. Then, standing there, the bourbon lying warmly in the pit of his stomach, he could see his mother moving around the room again, lying in bed, trying to talk to him in her strange old-person way, doing a hundred different little things. Unwillingly, he was taken back to a few days before . . .

Wrapped in the faded old green and brown afghan, she had sat in the chair in front of the window, looking down on the back yard. Signs of spring were here. Down by the creek she could see new grass peeping up in the patches the snow had fled.

She could see flashes of red as the robins, newly arrived from the warmer places, flew quickly in and out of the thicket in back of the house. If she stood up and stretched as close as she could to the window and turned her eyes to the left, she could just make out the edge of the field that stood to one side of the farmhouse.

It was covered with blotches of snow, too. It didn't look like anyone had been paying the least bit of attention to it. Of course, it wasn't time yet to

start the spring work, but Ervy would have been getting so restless by now he'd have started in, snow or no snow.

It was getting toward dusk and the yard was shadowy. Her room was getting dark, too, the newly budding maple a few feet away from the window serving as a long, spider-legged cloud to cut out the light. The wind had been blowing all day and now it made a mournful sound. She shivered as she felt a draft and pulled the wool covering closer around her shoulders.

She turned her head away from the window as she heard the old stairs creak. Someone was coming.

"Here's your supper tray. Can you sit up here at the table and eat now?"

This tall, handsome young man with the dark hair. Who is he? I must know him if he's bringing me dinner It bothered her so much when she couldn't remember. She looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"Ma, it's Eddy. Don't you know me tonight? Eddy. Your boy Eddy," he said insistently.

"Oh, Eddy, it's you!" She giggled in embarrassment, like a young girl—a frail wisp of a girl, a white haired, stooped girl. She was 89 but, a lot of the time, she was a girl again.

"There's no use even trying to talk to you any more, Ma.

You never can remember anything," he said, disgust in his voice. He turned to go.

"Bye, Eddy. I remember you," she said quietly, then listened, a lost sad look washing over her features, for the inevitable latching of the door until morning, when the breakfast plate would be brought up and the greasy, cold supper plate and heavy, stained, restaurant-style coffee cup taken away.

She put one ancient hand on each arm of the big overstuffed chair she'd been sitting in and pushed down. She didn't weigh much anymore so it wasn't hard to get up, just slow. She took the heavy cane, worn smooth and shiny around the curve of the handle from years of use, and, with halting steps, hobbled over to the little table with the lone kitchen chair beside it. The chair was rickety and it swayed a little when she sat. Then she examined the tray in front of her with dismay.

In the center of the plate rose a lump of noodles and mashed potatoes and butter, all mixed together. That was all. She stuck a forefinger down into the middle of it. It was cold.

Why, I wouldn't have fed the dogs something like this! she thought. *Course, Eddy's wife tries. They both try. Eddy's a good boy.*

She let herself drift into the past, thinking about when Eddy and Marie were little, before Marie died. She could see their sweet little faces again, Eddy all smiles and charm when he wasn't mad—Marie an angel direct from heaven, so sweet and quiet you'd never have known she was human.

She'd never seen two kids so different. Eddy never was awful sharp in school ways but in gettin' around folks, he was shrewd as a fox. Maybe that was more important than being smart in other ways. There'd always been a lot about Eddy that she didn't understand but she supposed that was because he was a man child. She had never been able to understand men. She'd always handled them by staying out of their way, not crossing them any oftener than necessary.

Marie was a different story. She was sober and serious, her huge blue eyes looking at you like they were old and wise and knew everything about you, even your secrets. She missed Marie to this day, would never forget how she had lain in bed those months when she was sick and never complained once.

Sometimes, in her head, she and Marie would run through the fields barefoot, laughing and playing. Then they'd flop

down by the creek bed, all tucked out, and dangle their legs in the creek, letting the cool water flow over their dirty feet and wash them, like sin being washed away in a river baptism.

She looked down at the plate and saw she'd cleaned it, without tasting it to see if it was as bad as it looked. Just as well, probably. The coffee was cold, too, but it didn't taste too bad. Eddy had sugared and creamed it for her and he knew how she liked it.

Eddy was a good boy. Back when she still had folks come special to see her, they were always telling her how much they thought of Eddy for taking such good care of her and how pleased they'd been at the way he'd taken over running the farm after Ervy died.

Then she'd be ashamed for thinking of little complaints to make about the way things were sometimes. Everybody knew Eddy was good to her. He'd promised to take care of her and he tried. He must have good reasons for the things he did.

Sometimes she'd get down ever so quietly on her hands and knees and put her ear to the heat register in the floor of her room and listen to him and Aggie talk in the living room below. It wasn't to be nosy or

anything or because she didn't trust him. It was because she got so lonesome for the sound of people talking, even if they weren't talking to her.

They did seem to talk about her a lot, though—or things that were concerned with her. They talked about selling the land off soon, except for the place where the house stood, and traveling or buying a business, maybe a bar, and hiring someone to run it for them while they took it easy. Or they'd talk about buying a new place and buying cars and a boat to use out on the lake.

They'd dream and plan a while then Eddy would start getting mad. Once she'd heard him say, "We can't do a damned thing until we get that old woman off from around our necks." She'd cried when he said it.

RIGHT AFTER THAT he took her to sit in the living room for a while with them one evening, instead of making her go right back up to her room after supper, like he usually did. When she'd gotten all settled for a nice evening, he'd asked her to change her will so he could have some money now instead of having to wait for it.

Her head had been working right that night and she'd thought it over for a while.

Then she'd pretended that she was playing in the field again and she'd started singing and laughing, sitting there on the couch. Eddy had gotten mad as could be at her and had picked her up and carried her roughly back upstairs.

She felt bad about the way she'd acted but she'd had to do it. She did that a lot on purpose. But she'd made Ervy a promise that she wouldn't let Eddy have it until it was time and there was no way she was going to break it, even if it meant being in that room for the rest of her life.

Not long after that, Eddy had Aggie dress her up nice and he took her over to Miller County to see about putting her in a nursing home. He'd shamed her and told her that it wasn't fair to him and Aggie to have to take care of her and watch her so careful all the time.

She'd decided she'd let him do it. She hadn't promised Ervy she wouldn't, even if it was in the will. She wasn't blind, she could see she was a burden and she didn't want Eddy taking care of her if he didn't love her. Too, she thought there might be other people to talk to and visit with and that made it seem kind of nice, in the long run.

Eddy almost charmed the

lady at the relief office into admitting her by lying about the land and the money. He had documents and statements from somewhere that showed they were poor. Then another lady came into the room they were all in and recognized them.

She said she knew about her and Ervy's farm, she had lived close by when she'd been growing up and still had relatives in that county. She'd asked Eddy why he was trying to put her in a county nursing home when they had that kind of money?

She had tried to tell the lady that she could pay for it herself, that she had plenty of money, but Eddy was mad again and cursing and he bundled her up and took her right back home.

In the truck he told her, "Listen, you old fool, your money is my money and you're not putting four or five hundred dollars a month into no god-damned nursing home care. Forget it." Eddy could be cruel when he wanted to be.

The very next morning, before she could make her slow way downstairs, Eddy had brought her a tray with her breakfast on it. He also brought a battered grease-stained cardboard box that made a heavy metal-against-metal noise when he set it down on the edge of the braided rag rug

that covered the middle of the floor.

"Eat your breakfast, Ma," he said, and sat silently and stared at her in a strange way until she finished.

Then he said, "Ma, I hate like hell to do this but I've got to. I know you're never going to understand but it's to keep you from trying to climb out the window or go downstairs alone, like you been doing, and getting yourself hurt."

He pulled a long shiny chain from the box and laid it on the floor at her feet. She could see it had a heavy black ring about the size of a small embroidery hoop on one end and a smaller ring at the other end. They each had hasps welded to them.

At first she hadn't understood what that contraption had to do with her. Then she knew and, like ice breaking up in a raging, spring stream, her stooped old shoulders began to quiver and she moaned, "No, Eddy, no! Not to your mother, Eddy. No!"

Furious at her pleading, he shouted, "Shut up, Ma. It's for your own damned good and you're not changing my mind by sniveling about it. I told you I had to."

Then he went ahead and padlocked the big ring around her right ankle and the little ring around the leg post of the heavy oak bed that stood in a

corner of the room. She had given birth to him in that bed.

Aggie had brought up a dusty old porcelain chamberpot with a bail handle and made a place for it at the foot of the bed. She wouldn't be able to use the upstairs bathroom anymore and she felt shame because they'd taken that private thing away from her.

She cried for a long time because of that and because of the horrible thing she had to drag around, like an unruly dog or a wild animal being gentled, but she finally decided it wasn't going to do any good to complain, even to herself. Eddy must think he had a good reason.

Finishing the coffee, she pushed the chair back, being careful not to tip it, and made her way to her place by the window. She had found she could get to nearly every part of the room. She was still shy of the door and window, though she could sit and look out like she always had. Eddy was right about the window.

More than once she'd climbed out on the porch roof, like she used to at home when she was a girl and had had a room like this one. She guessed she'd thought she was that girl again. Sometimes, though, she thought she saw Marie out in the yard or down by the creek.

She'd lean out over the sill and call and call to her until Eddy or Aggie would come up and tell her to hush up, that Marie was dead and wasn't anywhere, was just dust in a box in the cemetery. But it all seemed so very, very real at the time.

It wasn't really too bad with the chain. It had made her ankle awful sore at first, until she'd stuffed rags down between the metal and the brown cotton stocking to ease the chafing. She'd had a terrible time learning to sleep with it, though. She'd had to learn how to sleep all over again, flat on her back with the chain laying slack under the covers and to try to remember, even asleep, not to turn over or move her foot even a little bit. If she did, she woke herself up every time.

Now that they didn't have to watch her, Aggie and Eddy seemed to be going away more. They went out two or three different evenings and came home late and loud. She knew they'd been out drinking. Ervy wouldn't have minded but she didn't think it was right.

Besides, she was a little worried they'd forget about her or something would happen to them and they wouldn't be able to get home or, worst of all, the house might catch on fire and she'd never be able to get her-

self out. She wished they wouldn't leave her.

Then they were gone and they didn't come back until morning. She was almost frantic before Eddy came up, red-eyed and smelling like a brewery. He'd been gruff and rude when she'd tried to tell him she'd been afraid. It happened two more times and she didn't complain. It was no use.

The fourth time, she sat by the window watching for them and when they didn't come, she got so frightened she drug herself back into bed and pulled the covers over her and lay there shaking and hungry until, along toward evening, she heard footsteps on the stairs.

Only it wasn't Eddy. It was Aggie's cousin's girl, Judy. Once, a year or so before, Eddy and Aggie had had to go to Spokane for four days and they'd hired Judy to come out from town and fix the meals for her.

It had gone along fine for two days, then the girl didn't show up any more. She'd managed, though, to find enough to eat, to make her way around the kitchen, until they'd come home again.

Eddy'd been awfully mad at Judy that time. He'd found out the girl had gone off to Seattle with a boyfriend and just plain forgotten about her. Why in the

world would they have her here now, when they knew couldn't fend for herself if it happened again?

"Judy, where did Eddy and Aggie go?" she asked.

"Look, Mrs. Selby, Eddy told me not to talk to you. He says you're crazy as a loon. They're gone and they'll be back when they're ready and don't ask me again. You're too much bother as it is." Her lack of caring filled the room like evening fog.

When she left, she didn't take the pot out to empty it.

She came back the next morning and again in the evening, each time bringing cold, unappetizing food she'd either found in the refrigerator or gotten out of a package. She didn't talk, only looked at her in her sullen way and slammed things around in protest, against what, Mary wasn't sure. Then she didn't come at all.

At first, she thought the girl was just late. Then hour added onto hour, morning onto night onto morning, and she knew that, if Eddy didn't come soon, she was going to starve to death. Or be suffocated by the stench from the pot, filled now almost to overflowing.

She tried very hard to stay alert so she'd be able to call to Eddy to hurry up to her if she should drive up but it was getting harder and harder to do. It

was so much nicer to be able to take her mind off somewhere and forget, for a little while, about being hungry and smelling foul smells and being an old woman.

So she sat in her chair and thought about Marie and about Ervy and about Mama and Papa. She absently picked up the chain and put it across her lap. It was really kind of pretty, if you held it up to the light and turned it just so. It sparkled like the shiny balls on the Christmas trees she and Ervy used to decorate on Christmas Eve when their babies were still babies.

How those kids had loved Christmas! The gifts she and Ervy would make for them out of practically nothing were the ones they always loved the best. Like the rag doll, a baby doll in a pink flannel nightgown, she'd made for Marie's third Christmas, with the handmade pine cradle for it to sleep in under a tiny crazy quilt she'd pieced herself.

And the miniature pinewood freight train Ervy had made for Eddy that had taken two winters of carving. It had had a real little bell on the locomotive and tiny little hitches so he could hook and unhook the cars.

Back in those days, they'd always had a huge turkey with

dressings and everything to go with it for Christmas dinner. Sometimes a ham, too, if they were having a lot of other folks over.

Thinking of turkey brought her back to reality and she began to cry. *Why?* she asked herself silently. *Why, why, why?* And then she heard a noise from outside the house. Leaning forward, she peered out the window. She shook her head from side to side, then wiped the tears away from her eyes with a tattered old lace handkerchief so she could see more clearly.

A SMALL, BLONDE GIRL was standing in the back yard. She was wearing a pale blue dress to match her eyes and she was waving and calling to her to come.

"Why, it's little Marie!" she said. "Oh, Marie, I'm here, can you see me?"

Marie smiled.

"Marie, Mama's here. I'm coming, darling," she called. She stood up as though she was going to open the window. The chain tugged her back.

"Oh, Marie, I'm stuck here. I can't come." The sobs came as she thought of Marie so near and she couldn't go to her.

But Marie just went on smiling as she backed toward the creek. She waved her small

hand again and beckoned to her to come out, dancing up and down now, anxious to start splashing in the cool water.

The old woman stood motionless for a time, caught by her helplessness. Then the wrinkled forehead smoothed and she smiled. Almost briskly, with the energy of a younger woman, she walked over to the heavy bed and stood looking at the leg the chain was fastened to.

Then she rolled part of the rug back, pushed the chair away from in front of the window and, with a strength she never guessed she still had, began pulling and tugging the bed toward the window.

If I can just get out on the porch roof, Marie can come and take this off and we can go away and play together, she thought. Little Marie will take care of me.

It seemed to take forever. She spent most of the time sitting on the edge of the bed, resting between tugs. But at last she got the bed to the window and stood on it and pushed the window as wide as it would go.

She straddled the sill, putting her left foot out on the porch roof first. Then, reaching back and holding the chain in her hand, she lifted the other foot through. She was almost free! Marie would help her. Standing

up carefully on the roof, conscious of the slant it made from eaves to rooftop, she called, "Marie, here I am. Come and help me."

Marie was waving hard to show she heard when the world began tumbling over and over, making queer patterns of light and dark in her head. Her stomach was flying off in space and she felt just like she had the time they had taken her tonsils out and had given her ether to put her to sleep.

She was rolling in a tim can down a long, steep, bumpy hill and she thought she'd never stop as long as she lived. She was tumbling and she was flying and, oh, she was afraid.

Then she felt like a fish caught cruelly on a fisherman's hook as she was jerked back in mid-air by the straining chain. She heard a snap, like a dry old wood breaking across a knee. Her foot felt like it was being ripped loose from her body. She heard a far-off scream and it went on and on and on.

Then she could see the house beside her head and she was moving away from it and then she saw it coming to her, the side of the house that enclosed the porch. It hit her and she moved away a little and it hit her again.

Then she heard Marie by her side and she knew it would be

all right now and she let the pain and the sorrow and the fear in her flow out and the sound of the creek in spring and the touch of Marie's sweet hands flow in . . .

Eddy shuddered and hurriedly left the room, firmly closing the door. It was almost as if closing it would shut out the memories. There were a couple of other things he'd better see to before he forgot.

He walked down the stairs, picked up a heavy-duty lantern, turned on the outside floodlights and went out the back door. He hadn't thought to check the shingles on the side of the porch. They were such a dark brown that you didn't notice them much at night but, in the daylight, it might be a different story.

He checked most of middle area before he saw the blood. It almost blended with the side of the porch but it was there. Some smears and the dried paths of little rivulets that had run on down and formed minute lumps at the base of the wall. He got the hose and a wire brush and scrubbed them off, his alarm working itself out in the motion of his body.

Then he went out to the machine shed and checked to see if everything there had been put away in its proper place. Nothing seemed to be

amiss. He went back to the house.

A chill seemed to have set in during his short absence, an unpleasant, unfriendly chill. He went into the living room, gathered some wood from beside the fireplace and built a fire, standing back and waiting for it to settle into a nice even blaze. Then he got his glass and the bourbon, lining all the bottles up on the coffee table, and settled back on the couch, planning, at last, to really let everything go.

He settled down to some serious drinking. So serious that he didn't really know when he finished the first bottle and started on the next. It had to have been sometime toward morning because he shook himself out of his stupor long enough to throw more wood on the fire and weave unsteadily to the back door to urinate. He did know that the booze seemed to help blot things out, except for certain times.

Every little while, he'd see the whole thing again, go over it piece by miserable piece. Feel himself coming in the house last night and hearing the bump, bump against the side of the porch. Going, half afraid, to see what it was. And seeing his mother strung upside down, one leg akimbo, swinging back and forth in the wind, her head

beating against the shingles with each heavy gust.

He had run upstairs, kicking the pot over in his panic, and unlocked the ring from around the bed leg. Then, straining so hard he had barely been able to hang on, he had to lower her to the ground so he could unlock the rest of it. Jesus, but he'd been scared.

There was no telling how long she'd been dead but it couldn't have been long because she was still warm. She wasn't stiff so they'd managed to lay her out on the ground and take the ripped, blackened stocking off and put another one on her. Her head was bloody but it looked like she'd fallen on it so they didn't try to clean it up. They he'd taken the tether apart and hidden it in the shed. He was just walking back to the house when Bill drove up.

Eddy was living it over and over again between drinks of bourbon. He was having visions of a crowd of people, of Doc, Bill, Abe, Pete and dozens more, walking up to the front door with warrants and handcuffs. He could hear them jeering at him. Some spat on him. They laughed.

"Hey, the farm's ours now, Eddy. The county gets it because you murdered your mother when you put that chain on her, Eddy. And we're

the county, Eddy. We, the people."

"We, the people, hell!" he tried to yell, and found he couldn't. He poured another drink, his hand shaking so badly he missed the glass with most of it. He gulped down what had hit the glass and tried to light a cigaret. He tried repeatedly and, failing, threw the scorched cigaret toward the fireplace in anger. He never remembered falling asleep. He just relaxed and let the darkness come.

He was warm, too warm. It brought him back to his senses and, when he opened his eyes, he thought he was in hell. Flames were dancing around him like demons on a spree. They were running up the curtains and along the couch and

over him and he was gasping and choking, trying to suck in the air that was burning in his lungs when he did.

He jumped up and tried to run for the back door, his clothes and hair a solid torch. He felt he could make it, he was right under his mother's room and the door was only a few steps beyond. If he could get outside, he could roll on the ground, do something to stop the burning.

He had only a second to register surprise as the blazing ceiling dropped down on him. It covered him with warmth, swaddling him like a newborn child in its enveloping embrace, like a mother's arms, lovingly smothered his anguished scream that no one would have heard, anyway.

NEXT MONTH:

TARGET—MIKE SHAYNE

Criminal Libel Detonates Death

by **BRETT HALLIDAY**

When a key witness vanishes, Tim Rourke finds himself in deep trouble—and calls on Mike Shayne to get him out of the jam.



FOR GENERAL WINEMAN, the city of Berlin had always been something like home. He'd visited it first as a touring college youth in the early Thirties, then returned as a conquering warrior in 1945. Since then,

most of his life had been tied up in some manner with the great glowing city on the Spree—so much so, in fact, that he'd returned to America only twice in the past decade, once for the funeral of his mother.

THE WOODEN DOVE

Why did the Russians build the Dove at the Brunnen Checkpoint? Why did they build it too wide to get through? Why did they build the Dove—to send the general up the Wall?

by EDWARD D. HOCH

For Wineman, as for many others, the post-war occupation of Berlin had become a lifetime profession.

In the years since '45, he'd seen the growing tensions, the blockade and the airlift, the riots and the Wall. They'd been long years, but always in their own bleak way somewhat gratifying. It was for him something like a giant chess game played out on a board that stretched across a city, with men and tanks and ever-present missiles as the pieces to be won and lost. General Wineman's Russian counterpart was a great bear of a man

named Zublank, friendly on the surface but with a hint of steel about the eyes. He, too, knew how to play chess.

Wineman perversely found November one of his favorite months in the city he'd come to think of as his own, even though the other officers on his staff were almost unanimous in their dislike of the dampness and chill which settled over the city every autumn. For some of them, the building of the Wall in '61 had at least provided the necessary shot of tension to break the sameness of the days and nights.

Perhaps it was this same

hopeful desire for something—anything—to happen that first brought the matter of the dove to Wineman's attention.

"The Reds are building something," Colonel Black told him early one bleak November morning.

Wineman grunted and went on reading the sheaf of reports which had just arrived from Washington by courier.

"Near the Wall."

"What?" The general looked up at the stocky white-haired man who had been his aide for the past two years.

"They're building something near the Wall."

"Aren't they always building something, Harry?"

Colonel Black shrugged. "They've been working on this day and night for the past forty-eight hours. It's getting bigger."

"Bigger?" Somehow the general disliked the sound of the word. It conjured up visions of a bad dream or a third-rate science-fiction movie. "What do you mean, it's getting bigger?"

"It just is. They've got it under a big canvas. Think we should send something back to Washington on it?"

"I suppose so. They want to know everything. Where is this thing, anyway?"

"Near the Brunnen Checkpoint."

"I have to go down that way," General Wineman said. "I'll take a look at it."

He'd said it only to satisfy Colonel Black, because he didn't really expect to see anything out of the ordinary at Brunnen. It was the smallest of the seven crossings between east and west, a gap in the concrete block Wall wide enough for only a single lane of cars, and even this had been twisted into a maze of barbed-wire barricades and anti-tank barriers to prevent even the slight possibility of an escaping car crashing through the wooden gate without stopping.

The "Wall" around West Berlin, which in the beginning had been mainly of barbed wire, had grown by now to a real wall over eighty percent of its length, fortified in key spots like Brunnen with the familiar dragon's teeth designed to stop even the most persistent American tank.

When it all started, back in August of '61, General Wineman had spent two hours on the phone with the Pentagon, pleading for permission to fight. The permission had not been forthcoming, and the Wall had stayed. Stayed and grown more formidable with each passing month.

Now, Wineman stood up in the back seat of his jeep and

looked across at the Brunnen Checkpoint, remembering all the heartbreak that had gone before. "Is that it, Harry?"

"That's it."

He saw only a great mound of canvas, already perhaps twenty feet high, just the other side of the wall. "Sounds like hammers and sawing."

"I've had a report. It's made out of wood, whatever they're building."

General Wineman snorted. "Well, you can report it to Washington if you want, but I don't really think we need to fear anything made of wood. Not these days."

It was one of the few times in his life that Wineman was wrong.

"GOOD MORNING, GENERAL. How's the wife?"

Wineman smiled at the questioner's interest. "She's in Paris or a few days' shopping and vacation. Wish I was with her."

"Just can't leave this place, can you?"

"I guess it's like home to me."

He passed on down the busy corridor and entered his office, glancing briefly as he passed at the pile of morning mail on Colonel Black's desk. It would be a busy, routine sort of day, and he wondered vaguely why Black wasn't already at work.

It was some five minutes

later when the colonel appeared, out of breath. "You'd better come, sir. The Reds just took the canvas off their secret project."

Wineman frowned and removed his glasses. "And what might it be, Harry?"

"That's hard to say. It's a wooden—statue, I guess."

"A statue?"

The colonel nodded. "Of a bird. I think it's supposed to be the dove of peace of something."

"Does it really need my attention this morning?"

"I think so, sir. They want to bring it over on our side of the wall."

General Wineman got to his feet. "Let's go."

When they reached the Brunnen Checkpoint, a fair crowd of West Berliners had already gathered, with more coming at every moment. These days in Berlin it took very little to gather a crowd in the streets, and this was more than a little. It was, Wineman saw at once, just exactly what Colonel Black had described on the way.

A great wooden bird, soaring some twenty feet above the ground, mounted on a curving wooden pillar that was itself attached to a wheeled platform. The platform itself they could not even see at the moment, because of the crowd and the wall, but the thing was being

moved, pulled into position at the narrow Brunnen Checkpoint.

"God!" Wineman said, looking at it. "What a monster!"

"It's the dove of peace, all right," Colonel Black pointed out. "Look at the olive branch in its beak."

It was true. Now that the thing had swung all the way around, they could see the olive branch, a shape of wire and plastic, apparently. The whole creature was somehow squat, looking a bit more like an overweight city pigeon than a dove of peace.

"I think it's supposed to be modeled on the Picasso one," Wineman said, looking up at the great wooden bird as if he couldn't quite believe it. "It's so crude, though! You can see that it's just been nailed together."

"Their head man, Zublank, is at the border personally, requesting permission to enter the American zone."

"Zublank? I'll see him. Clear a path for me through this crowd, will you?"

The general's jeep edged forward, scattering reluctant babbling spectators to right and left. One man yelled something at him in German, but Wineman's knowledge of the language—even after so many years—did not quite extend to the garbled street talk of the

lower classes. The man might have hurled encouragement or an obscenity, and it would do no good to speculate as to which it had been.

"Over here, sir," Colonel Black directed.

Wineman left the jeep, returning the quick salute of the military policemen on duty. "Good morning, General Zublank," he said, positioning himself to avoid the necessity for shaking hands. "What can I do for you today?"

Zublank was a pleasant man with the body of a bear and the face of a small boy. Only the eyes, the steel gray of them, hinted at a mind not always in agreement with the face.

"The people of East Berlin have constructed this peace dove as a gift, a symbol between our peoples," he said, in English that was much better than General Wineman's German or Russian. "We wish permission to bring it over to your side, as a symbol of the eventual reuniting of all Germany."

Wineman had never heard Russians talking about a unified Germany before, at least not in public. He frowned and looked up at the great towering wooden dove. "I couldn't give permission for anything like that," he said finally.

Zublank blinked his hard

eyes. "It is a gift," he said simply. "A gift of peace."

"And they send a general to deliver it?"

"They send a general to speak to a general."

Wineman glanced around, stalling for time. At his back, five hundred West Germans were waiting to see what he would do. He leaned back against the firmness of a concrete anti-tank barrier and said, "It won't fit."

"What?"

"It won't fit. Even if we wanted your dove, it wouldn't fit through the gate. It's too wide for the Brunnan Checkpoint."

But this seemed not to bother General Zublank. He waved a hand and said, "We are prepared to widen the gate enough to allow it through."

"Good! You do that and then we'll talk some more. Tomorrow." He turned his back on the Russian and walked quickly away, back to his waiting jeep. Colonel Black followed.

The crowd, waiting with a tension which almost suggested the expectation of gunplay over the peace dove, breathed an audible murmur of relief. The showdown, if there was to be one, was postponed for a day. Long enough, thought Wineman, for Washington to make his decision.

At three o'clock that afternoon—1500 hours in the language of Wineman and Black—the colonel reported that the East German workmen were indeed widening the roadway at the Brunnen Checkpoint.

"They've taken out the barbed wire and the anti-tank stuff," he told General Wineman, "and now they're chipping away at the Wall itself. They're just making it wide enough for the dove, though. No wider."

"All right," Wineman sighed. "Have you roused anyone at the Pentagon yet?"

"It's only nine o'clock there."

"I know what time it is there! Damn it, if you can't get anybody, call the White House!"

"Right, sir."

Wineman leaned back in his chair and thought about Paris. Not the city where his wife was vacationing, but the Trojan prince who caused a war so long ago.

"A WOODEN DOVE!" someone in Washington said, his voice crackling with static over the trans-Atlantic scramble-phone.

"A wooden dove," Wineman repeated. "Twenty feet high and maybe ten or eleven feet wide. It's the damndest thing you ever saw."

There was some mumbling on the other end of the phone and

finally another voice came on.
"Can't you just refuse them?"

"Without reason? It is a symbol of peace, you know."

"Can we let it in?"

Wineman answered, "Sure we can let it in, if you say so."

"What would you advise, General?"

"For once in my life, I just don't know."

"A wooden dove—outside the wall. It's a little like that Trojan horse thing, isn't it? In Greek mythology?"

"It's a *lot* like that Trojan horse thing, damn it! What in hell do you think I'm passing the buck to Washington for?"

The voice from the Pentagon said, after a moment, "We'll call you back. In the meantime, take all necessary precautions."

"Don't worry, I will."

Wineman hung up and glared across the desk at Colonel Black. "Well, that got us nowhere at all."

"You think they'll take it to the White House?"

"I suppose so. I don't really care what they do, as long as they decide it. Those damned Russians have got something up their sleeve, and it worries the hell out of me, Harry."

Colonel Black lit a cigaret and leaned back in his own chair. "Suppose we try to analyze it, General. Could they possibly have men inside the

thing, like the Trojans did?"

"The Trojans didn't," Wine man corrected absently. "It was the Greeks who were attacking Troy."

"Well, all right. But what about it? That wooden bird could probably hold a dozen or more men."

"Most certainly—though the weight of them might buckle that single wooden support holding up the bird."

"Steel rod inside. Could be you know."

"Oh, anything *could* be, but why? Why all this effort to smuggle a few men across? It's their Wall, not ours. They build it to keep the East German in—so why try to smuggle them out now? And this isn't Troy where eight or nine men can overcome the guards and open the city's gates to the invader."

Colonel Black frowned and made a few awkward doodles with his pencil. Finally he said "Well, what about a bomb?"

"They've got a heck of a lot of easier ways than that to deliver it. And if it's atomic, it'd do just as much damage to them."

"Well, then, maybe it really is just a peace offering."

"Why wood? Why make it just like that damned Trojan horse, Harry? They must have known we'd think of the similarity."

Colonel Black put down his

pencil. "I give up. I guess we let Washington worry about it."

"Look, get a team of men out there to examine the thing. X-rays, metal detectors, measurements, the works. I want to know if there's anything in it except wood. If they object, tell 'em we have to check it over before it'll be allowed through."

Black went off with a sense of urgency, seemingly pleased to have some direction to his energy. Alone, General Wineman picked up his own pencil and made a few markings on the desk pad. He was still puzzling over nothing when the call came in from Washington fifteen minutes later.

"General Wineman?" squawked the scramble-phone.

Wineman's back went stiff. Unmistakably, it was the voice of the President. "Yes, sir!"

"What's the situation over there, General? This wooden dove business."

Wineman ran through it quickly, keeping his voice sharp and distinct. "We're making a complete examination of it now, Mr. President," he concluded.

"Good. Very good. I want you to call me when the examination is completed, before you allow the thing into our zone."

"I certainly will," Wineman was quick to agree.

The connection was broken, and it was over as quickly as



that. Wineman sat looking at the phone for a moment, then switched to the office intercom. "Get me Colonel Black at the Brunnen Checkpoint," he ordered.

After an interminable wait, Black's voice came on the intercom-telephone hookup. "Yes, General?"

"Find anything?"

"Nothing yet, sir."

"Check it for radiation too."

"I already did. Results negative."

"All right. Listen—pick out a man who's good with a bazooka

and station him in one of the windows overlooking the Checkpoint. I want to be able to destroy that thing at a moment's notice if necessary. Understand?"

"Right."

General Wineman broke the connection with a flick of the switch. He thought about calling his wife in Paris, and wondered vaguely why such a thought should come to him at this time. She'd be back in two days.

Unless he told her to stay there. Where it was safe.

But safe from what? What could a wooden bird do? What had it done to Troy, that wooden horse of so long ago?

Colonel Black shuffled through a handful of papers and glanced across the room at the general. "You really want to hear all the details, sir?"

"All of them," Wineman replied in a toneless voice.

"Well, the radiation tests were negative, as I reported earlier. X-rays showed no bomb or person hidden inside. The only metal contained in the thing is in the nails and the wheel axles. Otherwise it's all wood."

"What about the so-called olive branch?"

"Well, that too. It's metal wire that's been covered with plastic."

Wineman grunted. "Go on."

"Dimensions. The base of the thing, including the wooden wheels, is ten feet ten inches wide, by nineteen feet long. It rides eleven inches off the ground. From this wooden platform extends a single wooden shaft, curving slightly up to the dove itself. The shaft is nine feet six inches in height."

"Any supporting rod inside?"

"No, sir. The whole thing appeared to weigh no more than five hundred pounds. The dove itself is fifteen feet long by ten feet ten inches wide, and its top is just twenty-one feet from the ground. What does that tell you?"

"Nothing. Not a damned thing."

"We're still holding it at the wall, of course. And the bazooka is trained on it."

"Good." Wineman got up and began pacing the floor, as he so often did when deep in thought. Suddenly he slapped a hand flat on the desk. "That wire olive branch in the bird's mouth—could it be a radio antenna?"

Colonel Black scratched his head. "Could be, I suppose. But it sure doesn't connect to anything. Comes right off if you pull. I got up and tried it myself. On the ladder."

"Could the whole thing be

some sort of a homing device for a guided missile?"

But Black shook his head. "No need for it, General. And besides, I thought we'd already decided that a bomb would hurt them as much as us. After all, they can't expect we're going to cart that thing all over West Berlin. They'll be lucky if we just take it on our side of the wall."

Wineman sat down and rubbed his hand. "That's all they want is just to get it on our side of the wall. But why, dammit—*why?*"

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, as a November frost slowly melted from the waiting wooden dove, the man from the State Department arrived. Wineman would have been less surprised if the President himself had made an appearance. The man's name was Fain—Grover Fain—and he carried himself unmistakably like a man with a mission. He sat straight as a ramrod in the chair opposite Wineman's desk, his briefcase at the ready on his lap.

"I was in London on a mission," he said importantly. "The President thought I should view the situation at first hand."

"Sure," Wineman said, waving an arm. "View all you want."

"This . . . thing. It's a *dove*?"

"A wooden dove. Just like the wooden horse, and they went out of their way to see we got the point."

"Why would they do that?"

"I wish to hell I knew."

Grover Fain clicked open his briefcase. "Any unusual military activity in the area?"

"The Reds have an armored division on maneuvers, but there's nothing unusual about that."

"What about something hidden inside this dove?"

"There's nothing inside it. And even if there was, what would it accomplish, anyway?"

The State Department man looked pained. "Then there's no excuse for keeping it out?"

"None."

"What would you suggest doing?"

"Washington asked me the same question and I didn't want to answer. Off the record, I've got a bazooka trained at the thing and I'd love a chance to blast it into kindling wood."

"Destroy a dove of peace?" Grover Fain was appalled.

"I know, I know! The same thought has occurred to us. Maybe it's all a propaganda move. Maybe they *want* us to destroy the dove or bar it from West Berlin. Maybe that's the only reason they built it like the Trojan horse."

Fain was tapping a slim gold-

pencil on his briefcase. "I'd better call Washington," he said. "It's a decision they'll have to make."

"What are you all afraid of?" Wineman asked, too conscious of his own fear. "We've got the arms to hold West Berlin."

But Grover Fain only continued tapping his pencil. "Have we? Have we *really*, General? Did you ever watch a stream of water running along the pavement, watch it stopped by some tiny bit of dirt or a surface irregularity?

"It builds up, circles the obstruction, surrounds it, and then in an instant overwhelms it. The same thing could happen to West Berlin, if it happened fast enough. The opinion in Washington is that the city would be difficult to defend and impossible to recapture—without virtually destroying it."

General Wineman walked to the window and looked out at it, out at the dirty buildings grayed by November, the crowds of people going about their daily lives as best they could in the shadow of destruction.

"We wouldn't want to destroy it," he said quietly, almost to himself. And he knew suddenly this was the fear that lurked in his heart, too.

"All right," Fain said. "I'd better call Washington. Give

me copies of your reports."

Wineman was handing over the papers when Colonel Black knocked and entered. "What is it, Harry?"

"General Zublank on the telephone. Wants to know if we're ready to accept the dove."

"Switch him to my line." He waited a moment and then picked up the phone. "Good morning, General Zublank. Can I be of assistance?"

The Russian's voice came over the line gently, like an incoming fog. "I was just wondering about our little gift to you people. It still waits at the Brunnen Checkpoint."

"I know it still waits. And it's going to keep on waiting until we accept it. *If* we accept it."

"When might you know?" the fog breathed.

"We'll contact you. In the meantime, just keep that thing where it is." Wineman hung up.

"The Russian?"

"The Russian. He's getting impatient for us to accept his gift, impatient maybe to spring his trap. You'd better get a decision, one way or another."

At six-thirty that evening—twelve-thirty, Washington time—word came that the gift of the wooden dove could be accepted at General Wineman's discretion. Somehow the news didn't really cheer any of them. They sat around in Wineman's

office while the general himself stared at the big marked-up street map of the city on the far wall.

"All right," he said finally. "We'll take their damn dove. Nine o'clock in the morning. Pass the word to Zublank at once."

"Yes sir."

"And Harry . . . have an extra bazooka man there, just in case."

IN THE MORNING it was raining, the sort of November rain that had always brought forth the complaints from his staff in the past. This morning, though, no one commented on the weather. They were there, most of them, at the Brunnen Checkpoint, with tense faces and no sound but the water running from their raincoats.

"All right," Colonel Black said. "We're ready."

General Wineman was looking up at the overcast sky, wondering if it would clear in time for his wife's return from Paris that evening. Now he dropped his eyes to the wall, seen dimly through the rain, and saw that the great wooden dove was beginning to move through the checkpoint.

He watched its progress through the opening widened for its passage, occasionally glancing up at the building where two bazooka teams

waited for his signal should anything be amiss.

But the bird passed into the western zone without incident, its wings held close against its body as if to keep from brushing the dividing wall. Wineman and Black and Fain and a hundred others waited, but nothing else happened. No men suddenly appeared from the dove's belly, no explosion suddenly shattered the wet morning calm.

"A dove of peace," Colonel Black breathed. "Nothing more."

But Wineman wasn't ready to relax. "Harry, take your team and go over the thing again, just like you did before. Maybe they sneaked something in there during the night. Check underneath it, too, around the wheels and axles."

"Right, General."

"Don't call off the bazooka men until you're certain."

Wineman turned and walked back through the rain to his waiting jeep. He knew Colonel Black wouldn't find anything, but this knowledge only added to his uneasiness.

After lunch, when Black had delivered the expected negative report and Grover Fain prepared to leave for London, Wineman was still far from happy. He paced his office like a tiger in a cage, pausing only

to growl at a secretary when she brought in a letter with a misspelled word. His nerves were shot and he knew it, but he was beyond helping himself.

"What do you think will happen to the thing?" Colonel Black asked.

"I don't know, Harry. Probably the first dry night we have, some West Berlin teenagers will sneak out and set fire to it. Then our problem will be over."

"Yeah." Black was looking out the window, just as Wineman often did. "I wonder why they built the thing at Brunnen, anyway. Seems to me it would have been a lot easier to . . . Say, doesn't your wife's plane get in soon?"

"Eight-fifteen," Wineman answered absently. Something had just clicked in his mind. Something.

"What's the matter?"

He'd walked to the wall and was again studying the map of Berlin. "*Damn!* Maybe. Just *maybe.*" Then to the file, rummaging through the files until he found what he sought.

"You've got something."

"Damn right I've got something—if we're not too late. I want a general alert of the entire city. I want extra men and weapons here"—he jabbed at the map—"and here

and here and here. Right away."

"Should I call Washington?"

"Keep the line open. But before you call them put through a call to General Zublank in East Berlin. Tell him I must see him here at my office before nightfall, on a matter of greatest urgency."

For the first time in days, General Wineman was feeling good. He was feeling as if something was about to happen—something he just might be able to control.

General Zublank was frowning. He sat uneasily across the desk from Wineman, his steel eyes uncertain for once. "But what is the trouble?" he asked. "Does it concern our gift to you?"

"It does," Wineman confirmed. "It does indeed. You're a clever man, General. I imagine you dreamed up this stunt personally."

"Stunt? I do not understand."

"General Zublank, I'll come right to the point. You've made careful plans for a massive invasion of West Berlin some time tonight. You plan to overwhelm the city before anyone knows what's happened, figuring that the United States will let it go rather than launch a destructive counterattack that could easily detonate World War Three."

The Russian smiled, looking for all the world like an insurance salesman trying to be sincere. "Oh, come now, General Wineman! We are both military men. You cannot believe such a thing. Your advisors are quite mistaken."

"I'm my own advisor in this. It was that damn dove, of course. It was both the strength and the weakness of your plan. The big question, of course, was why. *Why?* Not why build the dove and give it to us, but why build the dove at the Brunnen Checkpoint? Why build it at the one point along your Wall where it wouldn't fit through? I asked myself that question, and of course the answer was obvious."

The Russian tried to smile, but it didn't come off. "Was it?"

"It was. All your business with the wooden dove was a clever bit of misdirection. There was nothing inside the dove—no men, no bombs. The reason for the dove was much subtler than that. It was simply an excuse for widening the Brunnen Checkpoint—for cutting a path through the barbed wire and the anti-tank barriers and the Wall itself."

General Zublank was on his feet. "I do not care to listen—"

"*Sit Down!* You'll listen to the rest of this or I'll have you arrested and locked in a cell for

the night. I'm not playing games!"

The Russian sat down, his face white with fury. "Go on," he managed to say.

"Look at this map! The other checkpoints are wide enough, or else there's just barbed wire in the way. But Brunnen is the key to it all. You had to use Brunnen for one point of your pincers, and you knew you couldn't just go out there for no reason and widen the thing."

"That would tip us off at once. You needed a reason for widening that road through the Wall. So you built the dove, and made it look like the Trojan horse to throw us off the scent. We were watching the dove and not the Wall."

"Why tonight?" Zublank asked.

"Your armored division is on maneuvers. They'll return tonight, and we'll think nothing about all the activity until it's too late. Only, General, I'm here to tell you we *are* thinking about it. I have Brunnen covered and, knowing about Brunnen, I know what other points you'll try. They're all covered, all of them, General Zublank. Make that first move and we'll destroy you." His voice at the end was almost a whisper.

"You don't *know*," Zublank said desperately. "You guess, but you don't *know*!"

"I know. I know we're staying in West Berlin, General Zurlan. We're staying in spite of all your Trojan doves of peace. We're staying because I happened to notice that your wooden bird was ten feet ten inches wide. And I remembered that was the exact width of the Russian T-Ten Battle Tank."

General Wineman was waiting when his wife stepped off the Paris plane. "It's good to be back, darling," she said into his ear as he led her to the waiting car. "Did I miss anything?"

He looked up at the clearing sky. "Not much. We had a little rain, but I do believe the stars are coming out now."

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by
ELTON TRIPLETT

EDDIE MCKEE STARED at the cream-colored ceiling. Perspiration edged the line of his black, curly hair. He had come to a decision.

"That's it!" he hissed, almost choking in the excitement of his discovery. He coughed profusely. "The impossible crime, and I can do it."

Years ago his father, tall, broad-shouldered and arrogant, had said, "Don't feel bad," Eddie. Some people have no talent for being a crook. You don't! So get into something else."

"I'll be better than any of you! Sooner or later I'll commit the perfect crime."

"I'll eat the statue of liberty



when you do," his beautiful dark-haired mother had told him softly, with a broad smile.

"How's the perfect crime coming?" he'd be asked, as he'd pay a visit to his home or see one of his brothers from time to time

"Mom's getting powerful hungry!" It became a standard joke in the family, meant to tease. Eddie was deeply affected by it.

Eddie was still high on his idea when Tari Albright, his fiancée, flushed with the effort of climbing the stairs, entered their third-floor two-bedroom apartment. He watched her fluid form move across the room, thrilled as always at the sight of her. She carried a small bag of groceries.

"I've decided," Eddie told her, "to rob the Piedmont State Bank, without a gun, in broad daylight, and come out with a fortune."

Tari almost dropped the groceries. "Why not try something easy—like jumping off the High Bridge?" She gave out a short, embarrassed laugh. "Of course you're kidding."

"No, I'm not kidding!" he insisted, showing quick contempt for her opposition. "Don't try anything cute!"

Irritation and alarm darkened Tari's gentle face. "Eddie, I work for Piedmont. Nobody can rob that bank."

"I have a new angle. Now don't argue," Eddie warned her. "Please! You're my girl, right? We're getting married, right? When we got this apartment together to save money, I promised no hanky-panky, no sex, until we get married. That was

eight months ago. So we need money to get married and start living, right?"

Tari just stared at him.

"That's right. You're going to cash the joint for me. Don't look so shocked. All you have to do is tell me about times, schedules, people. Especially keep tabs on Richard Fowlet, the bank president."

"You're nuts!" Tari retorted. "Richard Fowlet is a rattlesnake. Everyone at the bank knows he has a loaded gun in his desk drawer. He's always bragging about his marksmanship. From what I hear, I wouldn't trust that man with a baby's toy. He'd shoot you down without batting an eye."

"He won't have a chance. I have an ace up my sleeve he wouldn't dream of."

"Big man!" Tari said. Her blue eyes became saucers of outrage and disgust. "I know all about your crime exploits. Shoplifting. Age twenty-four. Five years ago. Your first and only crime, and you got three months in jail. Now you think you can rob a bank like Piedmont? You're crazy!"

Eddie grinned at her, showing his conceit and two rows of strong white teeth. "Cool it, Baby. Remember, I also told you I grew up in crime. Dad was the best safe man in the business, and there just wasn't

any better con artist than Mom."

Tari put away the groceries. "You weren't in any of that, you told me. You were kept respectable—best schools, best cars, best clothes."

"Sure, and I hated every lousy minute of it," Eddie complained. "I was respectability insurance for my people. Dad even made me go to Sunday school and church. I hated him for that! I made up my mind someday I'd pull a perfect crime that would make them pea-green with envy."

"And what about us? *Us*, Eddie? You have a good job with the Ace Electrical Company, and my job is pretty good. You're throwing away our happiness."

"Not throwing away, baby—getting," Eddie went on, waving his arms like a jubilant preacher at a revival. "At twenty-nine, I'm Eddie the failure. My job—chicken feed! Look at my brother John. Big time lawyer. Sure he's crooked, but he's within the law, and he's rich. The rest of my people? All rich, like John—crooked but clever. Crime is where the big money is, baby."

"And the big jails," Tari said.

For the next week, Eddie spent his nights—sometimes all night—working with something electrical in his bedroom, the door closed.

Tari's arguing and pleading only produced from Eddie staggering salvos of bragging. It was the "best" this, the "best" that. One night he told her, "believe I'm the best in the world. I intend to prove it."

After that, she stopped opposing him openly. For a bad dream week, she catalogued every significant move of the people at the bank, each night made out a list for Eddie.

"Good!" he exclaimed finally. "These guys are like puppet—no change. It should be easy."

Tari sank into the big stuffy rocking chair, and wept.

"Cool it, baby! Tomorrow this time you'll be laughing," Eddie told her proudly. "I promise!"

Tomorrow came. It was the day for the rest of his life. Eddie stumbled around the apartment, taking his time getting dressed. The wall clock said seven-thirty. At nine he would put on a black-hair wig, and before she went to work Tari would make him to hide his identity. He would wear a well-made business suit—new shoes, new tie, new shirt. He intended to look even the prosperous businessman. At eleven-thirty he would enter the Piedmont State Bank.

Tari came out of the bedroom and made a pot of coffee. Eddie

gazed down at the growing traffic. The June day was bright with sunshine.

"You can still change your mind, Eddie." Tari spoke softly, her voice showing weariness.

"No way, baby! There'll be no slips."

Tari poured more coffee. Nervousness showed in her thin petite face and the way she poured the coffee.

"Cheer up, baby! Remember what the Bible says—weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning."

She looked at him with open disgust. "Oh, shut up! Grow up! The Bible sure doesn't have anything to do with what you have in mind."

Piedmont Bank was crowded with customers as Eddie McKee entered casually. A smiling young woman told him where he could see the president.

It was a smaller office than he had expected; but the man behind the desk more than made up for it.

"Good morning," Eddie said. An icy calm came over him. He lifted a medium-sized suitcase. "I'd like to talk to you about deposits."

"Certainly!" the bank president said. Mr. Fowlet motioned Eddie to a chair.

"You want to make a sizable deposit?"

"Not exactly," Eddie grinned.

"I've made something I want you to see."

He lifted the suitcase—opened the two sections flat on the desk, exposing the interior.

"Excellent," said Mr. Fowlet, puzzled. "That looks like the interior of my bank."

"Wait." Eddie was quite calm now. "I want to show you how it works." He took from his pocket two flat square cases with obvious buttons. "This one is for the suitcase. This one is for the bank. Eddie slipped the case indicated for the bank back into his coat pocket.

Mr. Fowlet seemed alarmed. He stared. Eddie pressed the first button. A tiny click and puff of smoke emerged from inside the case.

"In the name of heaven!" Mr. Fowlet exclaimed. "You're showing me how you intend to blow up my bank!"

"Right," said Eddie. He was again acting his part, and superbly. "You have a sharp mind."

Beads of sweat stood out on Mr. Fowlet's forehead. He pointed a finger at Eddie in strong executive fashion. "I suppose you have placed explosives in and around my bank."

"Sharp," said Eddie.

"We'll have to come to terms, of course. I do not want anyone hurt. Certainly not in my bank. How did you manage to—"

Eddie cut in, "That's another story. Just play it safe." He emptied the contents of the suitcase on the floor, shoved it aside.

"You want me to fill the suitcase with—how much? What are you going to do to me?"

"Don't try to be a hero," Eddie growled.

"That suitcase would hold a hundred thousand."

Eddie was startled. "You're the big cheese. You can do it."

"You expect me to wait calmly while you walk out of my bank with one hundred thousand dollars?"

"Right again," Eddie gulped, amazed at the amount mentioned. He had thought of demanding twenty-five thousand. The president must be scared to death his precious bank was in danger.

"Let's move," Eddie said. "I'm not alone in this. If you aren't back in fifteen minutes or if you are foolish enough to try to warn anyone, you and the bank are done for."

The president left with the suitcase. Eddie felt himself trembling. He suddenly was sick to his stomach. He swayed in the chair, but regained control before Richard Fowlett reappeared. He placed the suitcase down by Eddie.

"I don't want any trouble," Mr. Fowlett said. His face was

drained of color. "I don't want anyone hurt."

"Okay by me." Eddie picked up the suitcase and glanced inside at the row of bills. "I can blow up the bank anywhere within five miles from here. Don't press the alarm too quickly."

"I'm letting you get away," the president said vehemently. "Get out!"

Nobody paid the slightest attention to Eddie as he left the bank. His car was a block away. He put the suitcase in the front seat beside him. Nervous shivers ran up his spine. Any moment he expected to hear the high scream of police sirens.

He drove to his apartment and parked at the curb, scanning the street, up, down. By the time he reached his apartment, he was out of breath. He locked the door, shoved the suitcase under his bed.

"I made it! I *made* it!" His cry was jubilant.

He removed the wig, the mustache, his clothes, and put everything in a big plastic bag. He took a shower. He dressed. He did not have to go to work that day. He had made it point to work overtime last week, and told them he wanted to go out of town today.

Eddie trembled so hard he thought he was going to vomit.

He fell on the front-room couch, feeling exhausted.

He slept fitfully. When Tari entered at four-forty-five, he bolted upright, cramped, bleary-eyed.

She didn't speak but went to her bedroom. Eddie heard the shower as she turned it on. An hour later Tari came into the kitchen. Eddie was sitting in a chair. He felt good and miserable at the same time. Immediate success left him befuddled.

He went into the bathroom and brushed his teeth for no reason at all. He suddenly trembled violently. He vomited into the toilet, flushed it down. After a time he rinsed out his mouth with cold water. He felt better. He went back into the kitchen.

"Well—you did it," Tari said gently. "I don't know how, but you did. Would your highness settle for a ham sandwich?"

Eddie sipped his coffee in silence. He seemed drained of energy, didn't want to talk.

"There should be something on the six o'clock news," he said.

The radio station was abuzz with the news of "the biggest bank robbery in this state . . . a smooth, professional job . . . one hundred five thousand dollars taken, in small, unmarked bills . . . three men dressed in

business suits . . . guns, high explosives . . . no clear description . . . Lives, as well as the bank, were saved by the steel-nerved calmness of the bank's president, Mr. Richard Fowlet . . ."

Eddie looked at Tari, his face blank. His lips moved, but no words came.

"One hundred-five thousand!" Tari breathed, her eyes bright with amazement. "I thought you were in this alone. Those other men . . .?"

"There weren't any!—and no guns! Your stupid jackass president must be really crazy. I was going to ask for twenty-five thousand. He was so scared he filled the suitcase with one hundred five thousand. Think of that! Now he has deliberately covered my trail. Don't you get it? I didn't actually put explosives around his bank, but he thinks I did. He's really scared."

Eddie slapped his knee and guffawed.

"Eddie," Tari said calmly. "Have you counted the money yet?"

"No. I was waiting for you, he told her."

"Count it."

It was the way she said it, the tone of her voice, the look on her face. A suspicion dug deep into Eddie's mind. He bolted into his bedroom, his

sudden frantic movement up-setting the kitchen chair.

He jerked the suitcase from under the bed, almost tore it open in his excitement. Then he threw up his hands in despair, began to moan, a low gurgling sound in his throat.

Tari hurried after him, took one look at the contents of the suitcase. "Play money! We use this in one of the display cases. You've been had!—conned!"

Eddie felt himself swaying in darkness. He grabbed for something to hold onto just before he struck the floor . . .

"You fainted," Tari told him, putting a cold cloth to his head. She had cleared away the suitcase and its contents.

Eddie began to moan, almost in tears.

"Eddie I love you, but if you start feeling sorry for yourself, I'll leave and not come back."

That calmed him. He followed her back into the kitchen. "Everything went so smoothly . . ."

"During the robbery I was in the basement lunchroom, because I didn't want to see you either arrested or dead," Tari

told him. "I was sure it would be one or the other. I'm just glad you're alive."

"Everything went so smoothly . . ." Eddie mumbled grateful that at least his family would never know.

"Richard Fowlet simply saw his chance and outwitted you," Tari said. "He may have embezzled funds and needed to cover the loss, or he saw a chance to rob his own bank. Otherwise, I'm positive he would have shot you."

"And no way to report him!"

"None."

"Merciful God!"

Tari looked at Eddie, studying him. A smile played at the corners of her mouth.

Abruptly she began to laugh. She shook her head, tossing her long auburn hair violently. For a few moments she was unable to control her giggles. She crossed the room and looked out the window. She was still laughing when she turned to Eddie, who seemed frozen with despair.

"Well," Tari said, still laughing, "you did accomplish one thing. You said you'd have me laughing by tonight."



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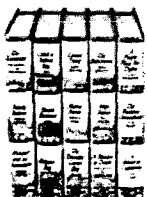
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